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"It's getting a bit desperate isn't it!":

Communication on the Ward

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Most visitors to Wellington Hospital will be struck by the atmosphere of serenity conveyed by the nurses - the idea that there is any element of desperation in ward interaction would strike them as ludicrous. Day and night, ward nurses calmly manage a large number of patients, doctors, and visitors, as well as the wide-ranging demands these people make on them, giving little indication of the relentless ongoing stresses that their jobs inevitably entail.

A small team from Victoria University's Language in the Workplace Project recently tracked three nurses on the job in Wellington Hospital wards to get some idea of how they managed the minute-to-minute demands on their time and communication skills. We were amazed at the wide range and large number of interactions these nurses engaged in over relatively short periods of time. Roughly speaking the nurses averaged one transaction every three minutes, and they talked to patients, cleaners, relatives and friends of patients, other nurses, doctors, ward orderlies, social workers, chaplains, and many more.... Yet few people ever reflect, it seems, on the communicative skills required to interact successfully with such a diverse variety of people.

From our perspective as sociolinguists, nurses develop a very wide verbal repertoire; and they demonstrate remarkable communication skills in selecting appropriate ways of getting things done in very diverse social contexts. One example of this skill is their use of humour to lighten the inevitable strains and stresses of interaction on the ward.

Nurses joke with patients to help them feel more relaxed. While removing a tube from a patient's wound (a painful procedure), one nurse held a humorous exchange with the patient, Sophie, who was about the same age as herself, about the fact that mothers liked to molly-coddle even adult daughters whenever they go home. Sophie says, for instance, that she gets "treated like a queen" by her mum, and the nurse Tara tells her to "lap it up". During all this talk, Tara takes out the cannula. Her colloquial friendly chat, full of humour, helps distract Sophie from the discomfort involved. Establishing friendly rapport in this way obviously helps the patient feel more relaxed in this clinical setting, and assists the nurse achieve her goals as well.

In a rather different example, two nurses used humour to deal with their frustration that the doctor, Andrew, was taking so long to reach their ward. After paging him yet again, one nurse says to the other "it's getting a bit desperate isn't it!" When Andrew finally arrives, however, rather than "having a word with him" about his time management, as they threatened, the nurses in fact turn their irritation into teasing, welcoming him as "the man of the moment" who has arrived at last, and saying "come hither Andrew" as they lead him to the patient who desperately need him. The humour relieves their tension and frustration over his lateness. In other similar situations, humour allows the nurses to indirectly criticise the doctor in a non-threatening and acceptable way.

Nurses use humour regularly and constructively in their work. There are many and varied examples in our data, with humour serving many different functions. Our research clearly demonstrates that a sense of humour is an important component of the battery of communicative skills that good ward nurses draw on in managing ward interaction effectively.

Information about the Language in the Workplace Project

Professor Janet Holmes is Director of the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project which is based at Victoria University. George Major was the research assistant for this the project. Other team members, and especially Maria Stubbe and Bernadette Vine, provided support and advice.