A Nurse’s Guide to Life on the Ward
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Choosing a career path as a nurse is both challenging and incredibly rewarding. You will be required to take on multiple responsibilities, caring for patients with a variety of health conditions, including minor injuries right up to long-term diseases. The ever-changing nature of the role ensures that no two days are the same, which is why the best nurses are those who are able to remain focused in order to best help individual patients.

As well as passing the relevant qualifications and training programmes, there are more general attitudes, traits and work ethics that are leading criteria for being a successful nurse.

A substantial part of nursing involves communication, whether with patients or other members of staff, including doctors, fellow nurses and health specialists. Therefore, good interpersonal skills, both listening and speaking, will help you provide the necessary patient care and support a patient’s recovery treatment.

Likewise, it is vital that nurses are patient and flexible. You will communicate with a vast amount of patients on a daily basis, not to mention patients’ families and friends – keeping a calm head, assigning the necessary amount of time to each patient, and responding with empathy to an abundance of emotions and queries are essential everyday requirements. Nursing can often be unpredictable so you may find that you need to adapt to a change in situation or circumstance very quickly.

This guide will tell you more about specific areas of nursing and the duties you will be expected to perform whilst navigating life on the hospital ward.
Managing Your Time & Organising Your Duties

Nursing is a demanding role that can see you working long hours. Despite lengthy shifts it may still seem like there aren’t enough hours in the day to complete all of your duties.

Due to the dynamic nature of the role, you may find that it is hard to maintain a steady routine. New queries or complications with patients may require urgent attention, or certain circumstances may change suddenly – which can really mix up your day.

Implementing some time management tricks can help you bring some structure back into your day, easing the stress of a heavy workload.

‘certain circumstances may change suddenly’

Think in Advance

One simple way of organising your tasks, whatever your career, is to make a list of things that need completing or monitoring. It can be difficult when you work in such an unpredictable role, but as a nurse it is still possible to think ahead and roughly plan out your day. Having a written list to refer to for each specific day will ensure that certain duties are not forgotten or neglected, relieving some of the pressure and stress of the role.
This may include:

- checking up on a patient
- contacting a doctor
- administering the correct drugs or injections
- maintaining patient records

Try to allot each duty or task an estimated timescale, to give you a general idea of how to fit them into the day.

‘allot each duty or task an estimated timescale’

Some things may only require ten minutes of your day, but other duties may take a lot longer. Shorter tasks could be completed at the same time or when you have a spare few minutes.

Prioritise Duties That Are Especially Important

When emergency situations arise or an unexpected task requires your attention immediately, it can be all too easy to forget about the other tasks you had planned to do. When you make a day-to-day list, it’s wise to highlight duties that have the highest priority. By doing this, you can better guarantee that these definitely will be addressed at some point throughout the day, and you’ll also be able to see which secondary tasks can wait until a later date. Many of your priorities may not actually be particularly time-consuming either.
Ticking tasks off of your list as you complete them will give you a sense of achievement and ease stress levels, as well as making it clearer which things, if any, are still outstanding. Remember, it is alright if you can’t get everything done in one day. Packing everything in while contending with a rapidly changing environment can cause unnecessary stress.

**Tidy Up Your Workspace**

The saying ‘tidy desk, tidy mind’ is all too true. If you have your own office or desk space, keeping on top of paperwork and other files can really help to declutter your day too. It only requires a few minutes at the end of the day to tidy up your workspace and put all your files where they need to be.

‘**tidy desk, tidy mind**’

This will help you start the next day afresh and will make it far easier to approach new tasks without the hassle of rummaging for specific documents. Many hospitals have their own filing systems, which can help you keep on top of your paperwork, but it is worth adjusting this system for your own personal workload as well.
Maintain a Healthy Work-Life Balance

Due to the fast pace of a nursing role, it is essential to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Staying healthy is extremely important and can have a positive impact on the organisation of your day. If you are overworked or suffering from illness, it is far harder to concentrate on your duties or maintain a sense of routine.

Setting aside time to relax away from work will mean you can arrive at the hospital feeling refreshed and unstressed, helping you complete your day-to-day nursing duties more efficiently. Seek out new hobbies, allow time to do your favourite things, and set dates to see your friends and family.

It can be difficult to leave thoughts about work at work, especially if a patient is in a particularly troubling situation, but it is vital to separate work from your personal life in order to stay happy and healthy.
The Protocol for History-Taking & Patient Examination

An important duty in your day-to-day role as a nurse is completing history-taking and patient examinations. History-taking is largely learnt when you are working on the ward rather than during your initial training to become a nurse, whereas patient examination requires you to use your medical understanding.

To complete both of these tasks as efficiently and effectively as possible, there are a number of essential protocols to bear in mind.

History-Taking Requires Strong Communication

In order to assess your patient’s circumstances and establish the reason for their medical referral, you will need to ask them several questions. Throughout the process, communication is incredibly important.

‘communication is incredibly important’

Listen to the patient and make notes on the relevant information they provide. Having strong communication skills is vital to a success in nursing role, but particularly so during these opening (and closing) consultations.
Vary the consultation between open and closed questions to make the process as simple for the patient as possible. Avoid using any complicated medical terms to prevent confusion or unease. Some information may be difficult for the patient to discuss, so it is crucial to show respect, empathy and sensitivity to their situation and culture.

The patient should be made to feel comfortable when talking through their symptoms and medical history: you can achieve this by using open body language and maintaining a friendly atmosphere in the consultation room. This initial consultation is also an opportunity for the patient to raise any personal concerns or worries they may have about their health issue(s) or possible treatments, so it’s important that they feel relaxed enough to do so.

‘the patient should feel comfortable’

After you have completed each stage or the full process, offer a verbal summary of your notes to the patient, in order to check that no important information is missing and that there are no inaccuracies.
The necessary questions you need to ask your patient can be grouped into the following five categories:

• **The Present Situation**

Ask the patient to explain, in their own words, why they are seeking medical help and what symptoms they are suffering from. This will help you to understand the patient’s perception of their illness or medical problem.

• **The History of the Situation**

So that you are able to judge the path of the illness, ask the patient when the symptoms first started and how they have changed over the course of the last few days or weeks. Address the three major question terms: when, where, how. This is also an opportunity to find out whether this is a recurring medical problem for the patient.

• **Past Medical History**

Tracing the patient’s medical history may provide insight into their current situation. Ask about any past illnesses, injuries, major accidents, hospitalisations (both medical and psychiatric), or surgery – including medical incidents from childhood.

It is crucial to note any allergies the patient may have (whether food/drink, drugs or environment-related), as well ascertain if they have a history of substance abuse, in the form of cigarettes, alcohol or recreational drugs.
In terms of their daily health patterns, it is helpful to find out about the patient’s general diet, sleep patterns, physical activity levels, sexual activity, and any current medication (subscribed over the counter or from a local pharmacy) they may be taking. If the patient is female, you will need to get any relevant obstetrical or gynaecological information.

• Family History

With regards to assessing if there are any possible genetic diseases that may have been passed on to (or implicate) your patient, ask about any recurring health issues within the family – for example, if there is a pattern of heart problems or cancer. The environmental upbringing of your patient may also have implications on their health, so the knowledge of their place of birth may be important.

• Psychosocial History

There is a limit as to how much you are allowed to ask about a patient’s social history, but general lifestyle information – such as their education, employment, personal relationships, religious beliefs, and outlook on the future – may be extremely relevant when diagnosing or referring them.

Use open phrases, such as “In order for me to get a fuller picture, I need to ask you some questions about…”, and “If you don’t mind, I would like to ask you about…”. This way, you can maintain a level of trust between yourself and the patient.
Review the Systems with a Patient Examination

The second stage of the initial consultation requires you to review the systems and examine the patient. The easiest way to check for very specific symptoms is to follow a head-to-toe body sequence. Ask the patient about any aches, pains, discomfort or issues throughout the body, examining each of the different body systems:

- **Locomotor** - Is there any stiffness, swelling or loss of function anywhere?

- **Cardiorespiratory** - Is their breathing irregular or difficult and are there any chest pains?

- **Gastrointestinal** - Is there any nausea/vomiting, heartburn/indigestion, bowel trouble or abdominal pain?

- **Genitourinary (including gynaecology)** - Are there any changes in urine habits or menstrual difficulties (where applicable)?

- **Central nervous system** - Has the patient suffered from headaches, dizziness or fits?

It is also worth assessing the general functioning of the body, in terms of skin problems, mood, weight or appearance changes, fatigue, or loss of appetite. Lastly, a nurse is recommended to make an assessment of the psychological state of a patient. This can be judged based on their answers during history-taking, as well as their emotional reactions.
Collating the Information

After the process, the history-taking information sourced during your nurse-patient interview remains separate to that in the examination, and is used for future diagnosis or reference. A nurse is required to use logical reasoning to make a justified opinion about the condition of the patient. Before the patient leaves, you should provide (vocally) a short summary of your review and outline what the next steps are, including a time-frame where possible.
Communicating & Building Relationships with Doctors

Good communication is the cornerstone of any nursing role. But this extends beyond the patient-nurse relationship: building relationships and clear communication with doctors is just as important. Often there can be difficulties in communicating with doctors, which can result in information being relayed incorrectly, if at all.

It is essential to keep communication open, to ensure that both you and the doctor are up-to-date with any changes to a patient’s health or circumstances. This will save a lot of time, avoid unnecessary stress and, most crucially, ensure that you provide patients with the highest possible level of care.

‘ensure that you provide patients with the highest possible level of care’

Due to the dynamic nature of your role and that of the doctor, and your very separate schedules, it is important to work well and coordinate on a patient’s healthcare plan.

Clarity & Confidence Over-the-Phone

A lot of nurse-doctor correspondence takes place over the phone, as your busy schedules will not align. As such, you must learn to pass on the relevant information with clarity and confidence. There are a number of ways to make these phone calls as efficient as possible, which will ensure that the necessary information is communicated.
• **Be Prepared with Your Notes**

It is common to get nervous when calling a doctor, but you can ease these worries by being as prepared as possible. Have your notes at the ready and the information you plan to communicate. Forgetting information or lacking clarity will not only make you flustered but is also likely to frustrate the doctor.

Check that you have documentation of your patient’s vital information and their symptoms. You should be able to communicate:

- Who the patient is
- What their current condition is
- Their vital signs
- Any bloodwork
- Their medication

You may also have questions for the doctor about the patient’s symptoms, or queries about their recommendations as to what the next steps should be, so it is worth making a list of these beforehand.

• **Provide as Much Information as You Can**

One of the major things that can complicate nurse-doctor communication is a lack of detail. Don’t assume that the doctor instantly knows the patient you are referring to or is familiar with their case. They will see dozens of patients on a daily basis, so it isn’t uncommon for them to forget individuals from time to time.

When you start the phone call, always specify the full patient name and their diagnosis/condition, and ensure that the doctor is clear on the patient before you elaborate. Then you can explain the purpose of your call, outlining any concerns or queries you may have.
In order to save your time and theirs, it is good practice to keep the conversation short. The more prepared you are with the information you wish to report, the quicker the conversation is likely to be. Avoid wasting time, by relaying the information with clarity and confidence.

If you are nervous about approaching a doctor, try practising the conversation beforehand. Speaking with confidence will prove that you are clear of the situation and it can help to build respect from the doctors.

**Build a Relationship Over Time**

Establishing a good relationship with a doctor over a period of time can be challenging, which is why it is vital to keep communication channels open. Always follow up their calls as soon as you can, and aim to deliver any change in a patient’s condition or circumstances quickly and clearly.

Before you approach a doctor for the first time, especially if you are new to the ward, ensure that you have familiarised yourself with the team and the roles of individual doctors. They are likely to specialise in various medical sectors, so it can be embarrassing and stressful if you call the wrong doctor.

Avoid any complications and ease the nurse-doctor relationship by following a few general practices.

**Document Your Calls**

Depending on the circumstances of an individual patient, you may be required to communicate with their doctor multiple times, spanning weeks, months or even years. As such it, can be easy for you - or the doctor - to forget every detail of your conversations, which is why it is important to document them.
This can be incredibly useful when it comes to re-contacting a doctor, as you will be able to see what has previously been spoken about and when. The diary should be carried with you at all times so that you always have it on hand to refer to, should a doctor call you. It will help to avoid any confusion or miscommunication about an individual patient and their circumstances.

**Follow Up on Missed Calls**

If you are having difficulty getting hold of a doctor, it is still worth noting down the date and time that you called, as a reference for when they call back or a reminder to chase them up if they don’t call back within due course.

If you are unavailable when a doctor calls back, you may be able to quickly relay the purpose of the call to another nurse, who will then be able to pass this information on. The process of to-ing and fro-ing can cause frustration, but relying on another nurse to pass the information on should only be considered an option if the nurse is perfectly clear what information to communicate on your behalf. More complications can occur if information is conveyed incorrectly.
How to Handle Emergencies

Emergency situations are not just isolated to ER nurses. If a patient’s health or medical circumstances change suddenly it is important that you are able to respond quickly and calmly. Dealing with crises and emergency situations can be stressful, so maintaining composure is essential. Showing any signs of panic may cause further distress to your patient, and could potentially put their health further at risk.

‘maintaining composure is essential’

Whether your patient reacts negatively to a medication, changes their state of consciousness or collapses, goes into cardiac arrest, or has a fit, you will need to be able to act immediately and adapt to the individual case.

There are a number of techniques to help you adapt to drastically changing situations and learn to respond efficiently and promptly to your patient’s needs.

Think Ahead

In a standard nursing role it is unlikely that you will have to deal with these kinds of situations often; however, training yourself to be prepared is key. During your initial training and introduction into a hospital you will undergo test drills to prepare you for emergency situations.
Make the most of this opportunity to seek advice from your seniors and other nurses so that you can develop a clear procedure to follow, should this happen in real life on the ward. Learning how to react under pressure in these kinds of incidences is a skill that develops over time though. There is no clear-cut way to respond to an emergency as every situation will be very different - but you should have an understanding of the basic principles.

**Keep Your Mind Focused**

It can be all too easy to prepare for the worst if your patient’s health suddenly changes, but drifting into thoughts of worst-case scenarios can actually hinder your ability to perform the necessary duties. Try to keep your mind focused so that you can provide the best care for your patient.

Concentrate on the task at hand to respond rapidly to the situation. With a calm head on your shoulders you are much more likely to follow the necessary procedures. A big part of managing crises is the ability to think quickly to be quick to think on your feet, which is near impossible if you let the pressure and stress overwhelm you. Certain relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing exercises, may help you to stay focused.
Be a Calming Force for Patients

If a patient’s condition quickly changes, they may become resistant, hostile or difficult to help. When this happens it is essential that you remain a calming force so as not to further aggravate or distress them. It is not uncommon for patients to physically or verbally act against your attempts to help them at a time of crisis, as their own panic can induce these complications or restrictions.

Listen to your patient and respond to them verbally, explaining to them what you are doing and how you plan to help them. A lack of verbal communication during an emergency can only escalate a patient’s panic. Keep the tone positive and avoid saying anything that could appear negative. If you provide them with a calm narrative they are much more likely to respond to you, so that you can help them as effectively as possible.
Caring for Cancer Patients

Oncology nursing can be extremely challenging – physically, mentally and emotionally - requiring you to follow the progress of a number of patients, from children to the elderly, often over an extended period of time. The individual journey of each cancer patient varies dramatically, depending on the branch of cancer and their body’s resistance to it, so it is crucial that you are able to adapt your care to their needs.

‘it is crucial that you are able to adapt your care to their needs’

As you see patients on such a regular basis to prescribe medication, monitor their symptoms and perform the necessary tests, you are likely to form relationships with them, which can be difficult if their conditions worsen. Due to the rapidly changeable health patterns of cancer patients it is vital that you remain focused both emotionally and professionally.

In order to provide the patient with the best care possible, there are a few things to keep in mind.

Every Day Brings Different Duties

As there are so many different types of cancer and the various branches of the disease can affect virtually anyone, at any time in life, an oncology nurse’s schedule will dramatically change from day to day. There are multiple duties that you will be expected to take on, including (but not limited to):
• General care for a patient diagnosed with cancer
• Answering any queries or questions from a patient, and translating complex medical terminology
• Reviewing a patient’s health history and ongoing needs
• Assessing laboratory, pathology and imaging study results
• Administering chemotherapy, medications, fluids, and any other treatments
• Managing the side-effects of chemotherapy
• Communicating with doctors and other clinicians about a patient’s treatment plan
• Offering support and education to a patient’s family

The essence of your role is to provide care for cancer patients, evaluating a patient’s symptoms and guiding them through treatments. You are likely to switch between the roles of caregiver, consultant and administrator, so it is important to be able to adapt to and apply your duties to each individual patient’s needs.

**Balance Professionalism & Compassion**

A major challenge of oncology nursing is learning to handle your emotions and maintain a healthy perspective on life. Since cancer is one of the most difficult diseases to treat and can induce a plethora of unpleasant symptoms, it is essential that a nurse preserves composure in order to best help a patient through their treatment. Yielding to your emotions and breaking down in front a patient, though it demonstrates compassion, may only further worsen their situation (psychologically) and cause them unnecessary anguish.
However, cancer patients can become more reliant on attention and care from nurses, so you will need to develop a balance between professionalism and compassion. You will see patients frequently and usually over a lengthy time period, and as such you are likely to form relationships with them and learn details about their lives and that of their families, so it is understandable that you will be expected to offer a level of compassion. The best practice is to listen to a patient’s emotional concerns and anxieties, be a supportive presence during the often upsetting time, and respond by referring them to the appropriate professional care or treatment as required.

**Emotional Responses Are All Different**

No matter how old or young a patient, and whatever their circumstances, the progression of cancer and its treatments can be incredibly distressing. Everyone reacts to difficult times in different ways, and these kinds of emotions are often hard to control. Part of your duty as a nurse is to adapt to an individual patient’s emotional responses. Some patients may be more emotional than others, and some may even respond to your care or their treatment with hostility or anger.

In these incidences it is essential that you remain at an appropriate distance whilst continuing to offer the best care for that individual patient. Try not to be overwhelmed by the demands of the job, as this may result in unnecessary physical or emotional stress. Be sensitive to a patient’s needs and their emotions, modifying your manner and treatment accordingly.

‘try not to be overwhelmed by the demands of the job’
Consider their family and their close friends during the process too. A patient’s familial relationships will vary – for some patients, cancer may bring their family close together, whilst it may tear other families apart.

**Live for the Rewarding Days**

There will always be difficult days as an oncology nurse, but there will also be rewarding days. These good days are what make the role so rewarding, and many nurses who care for cancer patients will tell you that the best part of the role is feeling like you are making a genuine difference to a patient’s well-being, whether it is aiding their recovery or just being there for them through such a difficult time.

‘the best part of the role is feeling like you are making a genuine difference to a patient’s well-being’

Rejoice with your patient when they are doing well, physically or emotionally. You will see a patient through some of their most intimate moments, but the ability to help them is really a key driving force of the role. As a patient’s nurse you will be in control of their treatment and progression, which can be a daunting task, but it is also one that can have a hugely positive impact.
Maintain Communication with Other Staff

In the same way that it is essential in any area of nursing, it is important that you maintain strong communication with other staff during every patient’s treatment. Each patient will have designated doctors, nurses and relevant specialists, so keeping everyone informed about a patient’s progress is vital. You will be expected to liaise with other members of staff to follow through with the patient’s care.

‘important that you maintain strong communication with other staff’

It is also much more reassuring for a patient if everyone they talk to knows the latest on their condition. You can ensure this by keeping their records up to date and contacting the relevant members of staff as appropriate.
Caring for Children

Pediatric nursing is very different to any other branch of nursing, because it requires you to adapt your medical knowledge and interpersonal skills to care specifically for children, from infants to teenagers. As such, it is necessary to develop your own pattern of care to help guide a child through an illness or disease.

It can be difficult to understand what a child is feeling – they may not be able to vocalise exactly what the problem is or have firm grasp of any pain they may be in.

The best way to provide medical care for children is to interact with them in a fun and inviting way, keeping their age in mind when referring to complex or sensitive matters. You can take a few steps to make this easier.

Talk in Child-Friendly Language

One of the biggest differences between pediatric and traditional nursing is that you will need to adapt your entire behaviour and manner to suit children. Especially if you are working with younger children, you will need to communicate in child-friendly language.

‘you will need to communicate in a child-friendly language’

This means more than just cutting out complex medical terms – a child may not, for example, know what a ‘fever’ or ‘allergy’ is, or what the different organs in the body are, so it is important to refer to things in terms that they will understand. This is reliant on your judgement when speaking to the child; you may find that they know more (or less) than you had originally thought.
As well as altering your terminology, it is also necessary to adapt your body language when talking to children. Always get down to the child’s level physically – addressing a child eye-to-eye can help to ease their nerves, as well as gain their trust.

Remaining upbeat but realistic will also help to earn a child’s trust. Using phrases such as “this might hurt a little bit” is better than saying something like “this won’t hurt at all”. A child has time to prepare themselves this way, minimising any unnecessary emotional turmoil or pain. Another useful way of phrasing things is by implying that the child can help you – for example, “I need you to help me by staying very still” sounds far friendlier than a traditional instruction. Likewise, follow treatments up with reassurance and praise, such as “you’re being very brave”, to encourage the child’s cooperation and calm their nerves.

Distraction is a simple method to help you better perform your duties. Talk to the child about their favourite TV programme or character – referring to this and learning a couple of jokes can help to lighten the mood, distract the child from any worries they may have, and make them more comfortable in your presence.
Let the Child & the Parents Help You

If you give children a helping role in the treatment you are likely to find that the process runs much more smoothly. For example, letting children have the responsibility of holding a bandage before you need it or holding their fingers over the pressure point after having blood taken, will make them feel more grown-up and involved in the process, and, most importantly, will help to take their mind off being scared.

Parents will naturally want to be part of their child’s treatment and recovery. This doesn’t need to be a hindrance to your duties. Letting parents hold onto the child’s hand or sit with them during the process can help to comfort the child, without seeming threatening or controlling. Having a familiar presence and enacting these soothing motions can limit any worries and tears.

Have Toys & Comforters Handy

Every child has a favourite toy or comforter. If a child needs to come back to the hospital regularly or needs to stay for an extended period, encourage them to bring along their favourite toy, teddy or comfort item. Anything that usually helps to soothe a child outside of the hospital should do the same trick on the ward. The sight, smell and feel of such an item can instantly reduce fear.

It’s also a good idea to have your own toys handy to distract a child in a friendly and fun way. Having your own medical mascot for children is just one suggestion. Consider a toy that is popular on the TV or in film – Toy Story or anything Disney-related is usually a clear winner among children of all ages.
Children have much shorter attention spans than adults too, so you may need to take things one small step at a time. Patience is definitely a virtue in pediatric nursing. Unlike adults, children won’t be able to hide their discomfort as easily, so it is essential that you persevere, watching closely for any signs of fear or discomfort and reacting by setting the child at ease as much as you can. Using toys and other fun distractions will hasten the diagnosis and treatment processes and make everything run more smoothly.

**Keep an Eye on Details**

When diagnosing a child it is important to be aware of minor details that may otherwise seem insignificant. A child may have difficulty conveying what they are feeling, which can be a problem in your judgement and that of the parents too. The unfamiliar and often scary surroundings of a hospital ward can set a child’s imagination running wild, so they may confuse what is real and what is imaginary. This can cause a barrier in your diagnosis, so it is important to keep an eye on details – try rephrasing questions, maintaining a friendly and calming demeanour, to get the most accurate answers.

‘it is important to keep an eye on detail’

Listen to a parent’s diagnosis as well, and ask them about any unusual symptoms or behaviours. Minor things that a parent may consider insignificant or inconsequential may actually be of importance. This could include small things like the child showing or developing:

- Heightened signs of grief or anger
- Disrupted sleeping patterns
- Teething
- Problems concentrating or listening
- Repeated marks or bruises on the skin
From the outset, parents are likely to ask lots of questions to get as much information as possible about their child’s illness and the treatments needed. This is particularly common with new parents who may be more uncertain about specific ailments. However, as a nurse you should try to glean as much information from the parent first. Working alongside a parent in this way can help immensely when treating a child.
Working in nursing will teach you many skills and allow you to thrive in a caring role. Whatever branch of nursing you choose to explore, you will be able to apply the same strong communication skills, time-management, flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances, a patient demeanour, and a keen attention to detail.

Every day is different on the ward, which can make nursing all the more interesting and rewarding. You will meet many fascinating patients, doctors and fellow nurses along the way too.

We hope you can get the most out of your nursing career with our advice.