The healthcare assistant role
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Welcome to *Introducing practical healthcare*, where you start exploring the role of a healthcare assistant. Once completed, you will have the opportunity to obtain the ‘healthcare assistant role’ badge. This section will take approximately 2 hours to complete.

In this section you will be focusing on the principles of care practice, and what might be involved in the role of a healthcare assistant, by considering your job responsibilities and why caring is so important. This section will also consider the importance of looking after yourself within the role. More importantly, you will think about your personal learning within the healthcare domain, and how recording your training and development can help you become more reflective in your work. Learning from your own experiences will help you to do things better every time. There are a number of activities to help you along the way, where you reflect on what you have been learning within this section and how you can apply these new skills and knowledge in practice. You will also consider a couple of real-life case studies of healthcare assistants who demonstrate their common daily activities.
Learning Outcomes

By completing this section and the associated quiz, you will be able to:

- describe the tasks and responsibilities of the healthcare assistant role
- explain the importance of keeping yourself healthy and avoiding stress
- understand the need for training and personal development.
Healthcare assistants play a vital role in the healthcare team, whether working in a hospital or a clinic, a nursing home, the community or in someone’s own home. It is highly likely that you are (or would like to become) a healthcare assistant because you enjoy working with people and have the warmth and compassion to care for and support those who are needy, vulnerable or ill. Getting care right is so important because a care relationship is a special kind of relationship that needs to be set up and maintained with compassion and skill. Respect, equal treatment and support to patients in making their own decisions are fundamental to good care work, as is the need to understand the care role and how a skilled healthcare assistant performs it. You will often deal with people in ways that cross the normal boundaries of privacy and intimacy, and which will make them feel vulnerable, so you need to support them by building trusting and respectful relationships (The Open University, 2015, p. 118).

Your role as a healthcare assistant will involve assisting in patient care and working as a member of a team under the supervision of a registered nurse or midwife who is responsible for delegating appropriate tasks to you. Your role gives enormous support to
nurses who are then released to do other tasks that require more detailed knowledge, qualifications and skills.

2 Job description

Figure 2 Healthcare assistant

If you are currently employed as a healthcare assistant you will have a job description that tells you what your main roles and responsibilities are and who you report to. You will work under the supervision of nursing staff, and your duties could include:

- helping patients to wash, shower or dress
- serving food or helping people eat
- making and changing beds
- turning patients who are bed-bound to avoid pressure sores
- talking to patients to help them feel less anxious
- helping patients to move around if they find it difficult
- giving out and collecting bedpans, and helping patients to the toilet
- making sure the ward or patients’ home is tidy
- keeping supplies and equipment in order
- taking and recording patient observations such as temperature, pulse and breathing.
Your day-to-day work may include using mobility aids and equipment to help lift and move patients. In hospitals you may also help move patients between departments. With experience, you may be involved in the induction training of new healthcare assistants.

(National Careers Service, 2015)

Activity 1
Allow about 15 minutes

Part A
If you currently work in healthcare, find your job description and think about how relevant it is to the job you are actually carrying out day-to-day. Does it contain any tasks or actions that you have not yet carried out within your role? Can you think of any actions that you have been asked to do that are not in your job description? You might find it helpful to discuss your thoughts with your manager.

If you are not currently working within healthcare, consider the duties that have already been discussed. Write down any tasks that you think would pose a challenge to you, and why.

Whichever list of duties you refer to, use the space below to write down your thoughts.

Provide your answer...

You will probably have noticed that, while your job description considers some general tasks that you are expected to complete within your role, you also have specific tasks related to the setting in which you work. For example, there would be differences between working in a hospital, a community health centre or a doctor’s surgery.

If you work in a hospital, you are most likely to have been:

- washing and dressing patients
- serving meals and helping to feed patients
- helping people move around
- toileting
- making beds
- talking to patients and making them comfortable
- monitoring patients' conditions by taking temperatures, pulse, respirations and weight.

But, if you are working in a community health centre or GP surgery, you may have been:

- sterilising equipment
- checking a patient's feet
- restocking consulting rooms
- processing lab samples
- taking blood samples (if you have been specifically trained within a phlebotomy course)
- carrying out health promotion or health education work.
Part B

Some healthcare assistants choose to take on additional training within their role. Now listen to Gail, an advanced healthcare assistant, describing some of the additional tasks she carries out as part of her role. These are over and above the general tasks listed in Part A, having taken on further training.

Audio content is not available in this format.
Extended healthcare assistant responsibilities

Activity 2

Allow about 20 minutes

In the following case studies, healthcare assistants talk about their experiences of practical care at work, including particular aspects of the healthcare assistant role undertaken in hospitals or community clinics. Here you will reflect upon the differences between these three healthcare assistant roles as you carry out the next activity.

Firstly you will encounter Ann, a healthcare assistant who will talk about a typical day on her busy hospital ward. Listen to the variety of duties that Ann describes.

This audio is provided for use within the course only.

Audio content is not available in this format.
A day in the life of a hospital ward: care assistant

Ann’s role is very different to that of Kerri, who works in the diabetes team within a community clinic and describes her work in this clip.

Video content is not available in this format.
Meeting the diabetes care team

Gail’s role is again different from Ann’s and Kerri’s. In the next clip you can listen to Gail talking about the huge variety of tasks she carries out throughout her day, so that she finds it impossible to describe a typical day.

Audio content is not available in this format.
Typical day on day surgery ward

You have just heard three healthcare assistants (Ann, Kerri and Gail) speaking about their very different roles. Write down your thoughts and observations on the differences between the three different healthcare assistant roles in the box below.

Provide your answer...
Discussion
The main differences you will have noticed are around Ann’s patients’ having greater care needs, in that they need help to get up and get washed, whereas Kerri’s patients walk into the community clinic for a specific health check.
Likewise, Gail’s patients walk in for day surgery but are staying for post-operative care, requiring nursing skills more similar to Ann’s role. Look back at the Activity 1 Part A discussion above for key differences in their roles.

2.1 Physical examinations
As a healthcare assistant, you may be required to carry out physical checks to monitor the health of your patients. This may require a detailed examination of particular areas of their body which are known to display some of the symptoms of their condition. For example, the side effects of their medication may result in getting a rash. It is important for healthcare assistants to understand the types of symptoms that they should be looking out for in regards to their patients’ health needs. As you carry out the examination, it benefits the patient to keep talking with them and explain what you are checking and whether it will hurt or feel strange. You may also be required to give some feedback during the consultation on what you have seen and whether you need to take any additional action. Any changes in patient health should be appropriately documented and reported to the Registered Nurse or Senior Nurse on duty.
A typical physical examination is the one for patients with diabetes. Diabetes can reduce the blood supply to feet and cause patients to lose feeling in them. As a result, feet injuries may not heal sufficiently, or they may not immediately notice them. Diabetic patients tend to have their feet examined once a year at an annual review with their doctor, but they occur more frequently if there are any signs of loss of feeling in the feet, reduced blood flow or foot ulcers where the skin surface is broken. The visual tests carried out by healthcare assistants on the feet include looking for rough or hardened skin (calluses), ingrowing toenails and unusual colour changes to the skin.

Activity 3
Allow about 10 minutes
You will now watch Kerri conduct a physical examination on a diabetic patient’s feet. As you watch the video, pay particular attention to:

- precautions taken to prevent cross-infection
- checks made on the feet
- information requested from the patient
- advice given during the foot examination.

This video is provided for use within the course only.

Video content is not available in this format.
Foot examination
Discussion
You probably noticed the following points:

- Kerri wore single-use gloves to prevent cross-infection.
- Kerri reassured the patient by explaining what she was examining for and why. She demonstrated exactly what she was going to do in terms of pressure checking on the feet, so that the patient was aware of what was about to happen.
- She checked the feet, then tested for circulation (a pulse check) and also for sensation (by touching the foot with a pointed instrument).
- Kerri asked the patient whether he moisturised his feet and checked them daily, both as part of ongoing monitoring of his health.
- Kerri advised the patient to moisturise his feet, and mentioned areas to avoid (between the toes). She also advised him how to check his feet regularly, including the use of a mirror if he could not bend down to see his toes. She told him that he should also check his shoes for stones and sharp objects.

The tasks involved in the healthcare assistant role will vary according to the area in which you work. If you are on a hospital ward supporting patients who cannot get out of bed, or receiving end-of-life care, you will be supporting them in all areas of care: maintaining hygiene, helping them to brush their teeth or providing mouth care, and making sure they are not developing pressure sores. If, however, you are working on an admissions ward, your role will be very different: helping patients to settle and feel less anxious and taking observations such as recording their breathing, pulse, body temperature or blood pressure.

3 Your personal development

Your personal development as a healthcare assistant is very important, and some essential training will have been provided by your employer as part of your induction: for example basic life support, safeguarding, moving and handling, safe food handling, hand hygiene, fire safety, measuring and recording patient details (for example pulse, temperature, breathing and weight) and communication skills. During your subsequent career there will be ongoing training and professional development to enhance your skills further, and you are likely to have a Personal Development Plan (PDP) which enables you and your manager to think about strengths and development needs, agree your aims and objectives, and demonstrate your increased competence and achievements. This is important, especially as national bodies and professional organisations regulate the healthcare workforce and protect the public from harm.

Your PDP is an important document that is usually written annually with your manager at the time of your review or appraisal. It helps you organise your personal development for the year by identifying your learning requirements within your job, and monitoring your progress against them (Skills for Care, 2015a).

As a healthcare assistant, it is important that you have adequate functional skills which include literacy, numeracy and communication skills. These should preferably be to Key Skills Level 2 or GCSE grades A–C as you are likely to be reading care plans, recording data and giving verbal messages when you are with patients and colleagues. You might think about attending your local college or finding out if your union can offer support in this
area. If you are interested in learning more, you might like to visit some of the suggested websites at the end of this section.

**Activity 4**
Allow about 10 minutes

Write down some examples of the ways you use literacy, numeracy, communication and digital skills in your role. For example, think about when you need to read things at work, write things down, speak with patients or colleagues and use a computer.

Provide your answer...

**Discussion**

You might have listed some of the following as examples of the skills being used by healthcare assistants:

- literacy: being able to write on daily record sheets and read patient notes and care plans
- numeracy: taking numeric readings from patients (for example blood pressure, sugar levels in blood/urine number of millilitres of urine)
- communication: talking with patients, family and colleagues; active listening; body language
- digital skills: researching conditions online, updating online records.

It is helpful to keep a continuing professional development (CPD) file as a record of your learning, development and achievement after your initial training. In this way you can provide evidence of the courses you have attended whilst in the healthcare assistant role, which will help you to reflect on the progress you have made, and to demonstrate to prospective future employers your commitment to self-improvement. The *Introducing practical healthcare* badges that you can collect throughout this course are another useful way to demonstrate your learning. You may wish to download these badges to keep in your CPD file.

### 4 Looking after yourself

An important aspect of your demanding role in healthcare is to look after yourself, so that you keep physically and mentally healthy. Work-related stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE, 2015) as ‘the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them’.

Most people would agree that a certain amount of pressure is tolerable, even enjoyable. Different people, of course, react in different ways to pressure. Some people tolerate more than others do. But we are often at our best when the adrenalin is flowing and when we are working under pressure to achieve good results within a limited time. Problems start when the pressure becomes too great or continues for long periods. It then becomes stress. It ceases to be
enjoyable. In the UK employees are absent for an average of eight days a year, and in 2013 stress, grouped with depression and anxiety, was the fourth major cause of absence in the UK (ONS 2014). The five main causes of work-related stress that CIPD identified were:

- workload
- management style
- relationships at work
- organisational change and restructuring
- lack of employee support from line managers.

(adapted from OpenLearn, 2016)

Activity 5
Allow about 10 minutes
You will now read a case study provided within Unison’s Duty of Care handbook (2011) about a healthcare assistant making mistakes due to staff shortages.

Case study: Pam
A ward has been understaffed by one nurse and one healthcare assistant for three weeks. The employer claims to have tried to get agency cover but staff believe they have not tried very hard because they are trying to save money. For the last three days there has been a further healthcare assistant missing due to sickness. The one remaining day-shift healthcare assistant, Pam, tried her best but, by the end of the first day, was aware that even with help from the Registered Nurses, it was impossible to carry out even the minimum of necessary duties to a reasonable standard. She raised her concerns informally with the ward sister, who assured her they were trying to get cover, but said that with support from the registered nurses, it should be possible to keep going for a few more days. On the third day Pam made a mistake. She gives a drink to a patient who was designated ‘Nil by Mouth’ and due to be operated on later that day. As one might imagine, Pam is very upset and worried that she will be disciplined, adding to her feelings of stress. She realises that her mistake was most likely caused by poor concentration due to her high stress level, and wishes she had put her concerns in writing so there was no doubt how serious the situation was on the ward.

(Extract taken from Unison’s Duty of Care handbook, 2011)

Pam was facing a lot of pressure at work, and may have benefited from finding a way to reduce her general stress levels. Now, have a go at writing down how Pam’s stress could be reduced, before clicking to reveal some examples.

Provide your answer...

Discussion
You might find that stress management courses or workshops are available through your organisation. Skills for Care (2015a) also suggest a number of helpful strategies to deal with stress:

- taking more exercise or going for a walk
- taking time out for yourself
- doing something that you enjoy
- taking a deep breath
- counting down slowly in your head
- removing yourself from a situation and taking time out
- talking through how you feel with your line manager
- attending any stress management courses or workshops available
- engaging in relaxing activities whilst away from work
- looking at your diet and substance intake, for example, caffeine, and managing a sensible intake
- undertaking self-awareness activities
- talking through your stresses with a counsellor
- talking to a human resources advisor or occupational health advisor (if available in your organisation).

Extract taken from Skills for Care (2015a): Workbook 13, Health and Safety

What you have learned in this section

- The role of a healthcare assistant entails many and varied practical duties, which may differ between work settings.
- Healthcare assistants receive initial basic training, and a personal development plan (PDP) will help you identify further learning and development needs within your job. It will also contribute towards career progression.

Further information (optional)

If you are looking to develop your literacy, numeracy and communication skills, there are a number of resources you might be interested in reviewing after completing this section.

- You might find this link to the BBC Skillswise website helpful. This is a free website with courses and activities to improve your writing, maths and IT skills: www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise
- The following site provides a more in-depth skills assessment course: www.open.edu/openlearn/science-maths-technology/computing-and-ict/information-
The Workers Educational Association (WEA) run courses and programmes which help adults return to learning skills such as literacy and numeracy:
www.wea.org.uk/courses/aboutourcourses/About-WEA-courses.aspx

This website will help you to learn at your own level: www.learmmyway.com

Also, especially with increased use of electronic records, you may wish to improve your digital skills. If so, try following this link to the OU–Library which has an ‘Activities A–Z’ section for developing IT literacy skills (these are available in PDF form): www.open.ac.uk/libraryservices/beingdigital/.

For further information on using the internet for learning, try BBC First Click: www.bbc.co.uk/webwise

Section 1 quiz

Well done, you have now reached the end of Section 1 of Introducing practical healthcare, and it is time to attempt the assessment questions. This is designed to be a fun activity to help consolidate your learning.

There are only five questions, and if you get at least four correct answers you will be able to download your badge for the ‘The healthcare assistant role’ section (plus you get more than one try!).

- I would like to try the Section 1 quiz to get my badge.

If you are studying this course using one of the alternative formats, please note that you will need to go online to take this quiz.

I’ve finished this section. What next?

You can now choose to move on to Section 2, Working with patients and colleagues, or to one of the other sections so you can continue collecting your badges.

If you feel that you’ve now got what you need from the course and don’t wish to attempt the quiz or continue collecting your badges, please visit the Taking my learning further section, where you can reflect on what you have learned and find suggestions of further learning opportunities.

We would love to know what you thought of the course and how you plan to use what you have learned. Your feedback is anonymous and will help us to improve our offer.

- Take our Open University end-of-course survey.
References


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Figures
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Audios
‘Extended healthcare assistant responsibilities’ including transcript: courtesy Unison (https://www.unison.org.uk/)
‘A day in the life of a hospital ward: care assistant’ including transcript: from K114 Introducing Professional Practice, © The Open University
‘Typical day on day surgery ward’ including transcript: courtesy Unison (https://www.unison.org.uk/)

Videos
‘Meeting the diabetes care team’ including transcript: from SK120 Diabetes Care, © The Open University
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