

***Copy and paste the following letter on to your own letterhead. Amend as appropriate***

**<insert name of healthcare facility>**

**<insert address line 1>**

**< insert address line 2>**

**< insert address line 3>**

**< insert address line 4>**

**<insert date>**

Dear **<insert name>**

I am writing to you to seek your support for a new initiative to improve communication skills at our facility.

**National Care Experience Programme**

The National Care Experience Programme (NCEP) seeks to improve the quality of health and social care services in Ireland by asking people about their experiences of care and acting on their feedback. The National Care Experience Programme is a joint initiative by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health.

The NCEP now has a suite of surveys that capture the experiences of people using our services. The Programme implements the annual National Inpatient Experience Survey, the National Maternity Experience Survey, the National Nursing Home Experience Survey, the National Maternity Bereavement Experience Survey and the National End of Life Survey.

Developing and improving the communication and consultation skills of healthcare staff was identified as a key priority arising from the first National Patient Experience Survey in May 2017 and similar key themes have been identified in subsequent surveys. In the Survey feedback, patients and their families reported that while there were many examples of care and compassion in Irish healthcare services there were also some problems with the communication between staff and patients and their loved ones.

**The evidence**

Skilled healthcare worker-patient communication can help to reduce distress and anxiety and facilitate the delivery of empathic, person-centred care. Poor communication skills can have a negative impact on the quality of care, can fracture relationships between the person and the healthcare worker and can have a lasting impact on the person’s care experience. This is consistently evidenced in the views of the people who use our services and those close to them submitted through thank you letters, complements, complaints, surveys and audits and in inquiries and review findings.

There are financial costs too. Poor communication contributes to patient non-adherence with healthcare treatment and is a significant contributory factor in litigation cases (McDonald, 2016; Tingle, 2022). In healthcare, reluctance to discuss deterioration, prognosis and realistic intervention outcomes results in unnecessary and often futile treatment in advanced disease (de Haes & Koedoot, 2003). The impact is also experienced by professionals with shortcomings in professional-patient communication reported to contribute to professional stress and burn-out (Fallowfield & Jenkins, 1999; Maguire, 2000).

In the HSE the need for communication skills training has been stated in recent inquiries, internal reviews, guidelines and strategies. Of note, the HSE’s Better Together: The Health Services Patient Engagement Roadmap’ (HSE, 2023) recognises the importance of communication and its influence on the quality of patient-healthcare worker interactions.

“Effective communication skills are important for both healthcare staff and patients to help build confidence to participate in engagement activities. The ability to establish meaningful interactions between healthcare staff and patients depends on:

* the healthcare staff’s ability to communicate effectively with the patient.
* the patient’s ability to communicate their lived experience and knowledge of their own health.”

**Programme Design**

Research suggests that while knowledge of communication skills is important, it does not translate directly into performance therefore, considerable effort has been dedicated to developing interactive communication skills teaching modules and support materials (visit www.hse.ie/nhcprogramme for further information). The modules are delivered in a facilitated, group-learning model. Module design and instructional methods are based on adult-learning theory and create an experience that attends to the psychological safety of the participants. Through viewing and debriefing video scenarios, participants have the opportunity to increase self-awareness and develop their communication knowledge, skills and attitudes. Participants share individual experiences, perspectives, challenges and strategies and have the opportunity to engage in role- play simulations, followed by a facilitator-guided debriefing.

**Facilitating the programme**

The National Healthcare Communication Programme (NHCP) is implemented using a cascade (Train the Trainer) approach and is designed to be facilitated by team leaders or facilitators working with small groups of staff in their department or service. It is preferable to use two facilitators as a minimum for each workshop – one being a competent facilitator with at least two years’ experience. If more facilitators are available they can take the role of generally observing and supporting the lead facilitators and providing feedback at the end of the session. Facilitators conducting each Module Workshop should have attended the learning and development preparatory workshops (NHCP Module Part 1 and Part 2) for this purpose.

The NHCP has developed an improvement strategy accompanied by a toolkit and materials available via their website and App, to support healthcare workers to improve communication skills at their facilities. The toolkit could help **<insert name of the facility>** to implement measures to improve communication skills and at our facility.

In brief, the strategy to improve communication skills is concerned with:

* Cultural change which focuses on the patient’s perspective, on self-reflection, and on peer feedback to achieve continuous improvement in communication skills in health and social care services
* Implementation of an evidence-based communication skills training programme designed to embed core communication skills within health and social care services
* A combination of other measures designed to influence healthcare worker behaviour and including the support of senior management for communication skills and care experience

**<Insert name of healthcare facility>** is already attempting/has in the past attempted **<amend as appropriate>** to address communication skills/care experience through **<insert any examples of recent attempts>.** Implementation/expansion **<delete as appropriate>** of specific communication skills improvement initiatives will build on this good work.

Your support in promoting the improvement across the entire healthcare facility and to the teams with which you work is critical to success. In particular, your support and input for the following activities is requested:

* Authorise/mandate a communication skills improvement programme
* Identify a NHCP Lead to direct the initiative
* Help secure funding for any identified activity or resource needs
* Support the development and implementation of a quality improvement plan to improve communication skills
* Support education activities (including opening the training workshops)
* Verbally support/promote the improvement at high-level organisational meetings
* Verbally support/promote the importance of communication skills to healthcare workers in this facility
* Act as a good role model. Communication skills behaviour of junior healthcare workers is strongly influenced by senior members of the team and senior managers

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss the contents of the letter and the programme with you in further detail and thank you for your ongoing support.

Yours sincerely

**<add name>**

**<add title / position>**