

## QUESTIONS you are unable to answer.

It is always important to acknowledge the question/s even if you are unable to answer them as well as acknowledging how important the question/answer is to the person who has asked it.

Challenging questions may be about impact on health or outcome. Questions such as "Is this going to make a difference to when I start my treatment?" "How will this affect me now?"

Although these are really important questions for the patient you are not likely, or expected to answer them.

Don't feel under pressure to answer questions outside your role or responsibility.

### Helpful responses to any questions you are unable to answer:

**Acknowledge the question has been asked,**

**Offer to refer on -**

1) *"I can hear you are wondering if this will affect the start of treatment, do you feel you could wait to discuss this with the doctor or would you prefer I asked one of the team looking after you to get in touch?"*

**Be Honest**

2) *"I can hear you want to know exactly when the system will be up and running again, it is being tested for the fault and repair needed as a matter of urgency; however I do not have an exact date to give you today. I am very sorry I can't give you something more specific."*

**Apologise**

3) *"I can hear this is worrying you...I am so sorry I don't have an answer for you"*

# TOPS TIPS - for handling emotions and giving news over the telephone

**EMPATHY** can de-escalate strong emotions very quickly.  
Three steps to empathise.

- 1 Notice the emotion – **HEAR IT**
- 2 Verbally name what you can hear at the level you hear it – **NAME IT & PAUSE**
- 3 Allow the person to confirm or state how they are feeling – **CHECK IT**

**EG** - "I can hear how stressful this is already and that this is something else to deal with, you sound very worried" **PAUSE**  
**Pt** - "I am ... I don't think my husband can cope with any more stress, he's so worried about me."

**EG** - "You sound furious about this.....**PAUSE**  
**Pt** - "Yes but its not you, it's a lot of other things I'm dealing with, thank you for noticing."

## Giving News - Suggested phrases

*"I am contacting you about this appointment because unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances, we are having to delay/ postpone appointments for (give time frame/day).....**PAUSE***

*"I'm so sorry, unfortunately your appointment is one we've had to delay. I do apologise."*

*"You will have a new appointment as soon as is possible, I realise this is stressful as it's such short notice, I do apologise". – If a new appointment can't be given immediately.*

**PAUSE** wait for the patient to respond

*"I can hear how angry you are – and that you are worried, you are right, it is not acceptable. I sincerely apologise that this has happened."*

**Be clear about how, and when the new appointment will be communicated if it is not possible to give that information during the call.**

## Strong Emotions

**ANGER** – is an emotion which indicates distress.

**REMEMBER** - do not take anger personally even if it feels like it and you are hearing a raised voice, shouting or swearing.

The person may be angry about what has happened, or about to happen. They are not angry with you. **EMPATHISE**

**STOP** - Resist giving explanation or information unless asked. It can feel like a justification and be defensive, which may escalate emotions especially anger.

## Handling Emotions

It is important to acknowledge the patient's emotion by naming it (say it) at the level you hear it. Only when the emotion has been named (recognised and acknowledged by you and the person) will they begin to calm down.

*"I can hear you are angry and it's because....." (repeat what you have heard as fully as possible).*

*"You sound really frustrated about this" PAUSE to hear the reason.*

*"I can hear how upset you are about this news .....you have a lot of worries, I can only apologise for adding something else. Could I have permission to ask the specialist nurse to contact you to look at how best we can support you?"*

Apologise if appropriate –BUT resist giving reasons/justifications unless specifically asked. Reasons may be related to systems failures, no beds for admissions, sickness with staff etc. however knowing this is rarely helpful information.

If the patient has mentioned making a formal complaint.

*"I am extremely sorry that this has happened and you have suffered as a consequence."*

*"I can hear you feel strongly about this, should you wish to take this further, please contact PALS who will guide you. Thank you for talking to me about this."*

If the patient is crying or upset

Say something like

*"I can hear how upset you are and can only apologise for the distress and worry this change/delay has caused you."*

*"We will be back in touch as soon as possible" or "I will look at how you can be supported more fully with this."*

This may be where you consider a referral to the CNS for review..

**Note.** Only give an explanation if patients ask for one. It may come across as justification otherwise. The simpler the explanation the better.

If an explanation is requested, something like.....*"Unfortunately due to circumstances beyond our control we have a technical failure and are unable to carry out the procedure – every effort is being made to rectify the situation as quickly as possible".*

