Strangers in Crisis: 
Communicating with Patients and Families in 
Emergency Department and Inpatient Settings

Introduction
Patients enter the hospital and the emergency department in crisis and are met by strangers who in an instant become responsible for their care. On the inpatient services the clinicians are attendings, hospitalists and intensivists as well as other specialists and people in training: medical students, residents, nursing students. In the emergency room they are the emergency department physicians, PAs and nurses. Time pressures, high information processing needs and the seriousness and complexity of the patient’s medical problems contribute to the intensity of the situation.

In an effort to better equip clinicians to manage communication challenges in the emergency department and inpatient settings, the Institute developed Strangers in Crisis.

The Challenge
The familiarity of the primary care provider and the “doctor’s office” are gone. The newness of the hospital setting adds to the sense of crisis. Systems are encountered that are foreign to the patient and the family. It is within this setting that communication with patient, family, and other health care workers becomes critical. Bad news may have to be delivered. Tough decisions may have to be made. Time pressures abound. Patients are transferred from one clinician to the next and from service to service. Everyone’s antenna are fully extended, sensitive to the nuances that might convey some meaning, some glimpse of hope or despair.

The challenge, then, is to provide clinicians with tools to help them effectively and efficiently establish a relationship with patients and families and communicate in a way that will enhance patient and family satisfaction and reduce complaints while also promoting excellent clinical care.

The Program
Strangers in Crisis is a one day program for health care workers who work in hospital and emergency settings. Developed in cooperation with Kaiser Permanente of Northern California, the program is based upon surveys and interviews that were done with hospitalists at Kaiser and emergency department physicians at Duke.

The nature of shift work in the hospital setting has made it possible to develop the workshop as a full day program. The workshop is highly interactive and engages participants in considering communication with multiple systems: patients, families, and other health care workers. Specific communication models are taught and practiced extensively during the workshop.
Objectives
By the end of the workshop participants will:

- Understand the role of communication in promoting patient and family satisfaction with and reducing complaints about hospitalization and emergency department visits
- Be able to use specific clinician skills for communicating with patients, families and colleagues
- Master a communication protocol for addressing clinical hand-offs

Content
Strangers in Crisis is based on theories and models of communication in three areas: 1) clinician-patient communication; 2) communication with families of medical patients; and 3) team communication. To address clinician-patient communication, the Institute’s 4E Model (Engage, Empathize, Educate and Enlist) has been adapted to the emergency department and inpatient settings. Participants will also learn specific strategies for communicating with families in emergency departments and inpatient settings and will learn a protocol for addressing clinical hand-offs.

Process
Strangers in Crisis consists of mini-lectures, interactive exercises, videotaped case studies and skill practice with peers to build participant awareness, knowledge, skills and confidence regarding communication in these settings. Case examples frame realistic issues involving patients and families grappling with substance abuse problems, cancer pain management and end of life care. The workshop workbook includes an extensive annotated bibliography. At the end of the workshop, participants are asked to commit to trying out one or two new communication strategies for a period of five weeks and then to evaluate the outcomes associated with these approaches.

Faculty
The faculty for Strangers in Crisis is drawn from the faculty of the Institute for Healthcare Communication. Most faculty members are physicians, nurses or behavioral scientists with extensive experience as teachers and clinicians. All faculty members have completed an extensive faculty development program sponsored by the Institute and have attended at least seven days of training before they qualify to teach Strangers in Crisis.

We invite individuals to contact the Institute and inquire about our faculty development program. Our goal is to train individuals to present the workshop, to deepen their own communication skills, to coach their colleagues, and to explore ways to advocate for greater attention to this topic at their home institutions.

Sponsors
The workshop is offered by a wide variety of sponsors at different sites in North America. To sponsor a workshop, contact the Institute for Healthcare Communication. Sponsors include malpractice insurance companies, managed care organizations, specialty societies, government agencies, medical groups, and hospitals.
CME
The Institute for Healthcare Communication is accredited by the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME) and the American Association of Family Physicians (AAFP) to sponsor continuing medical education for physicians. The Institute for Healthcare Communication takes responsibility for the content, quality, and scientific integrity of this CME activity. *Strangers in Crisis* is designated by the Institute for Healthcare Communication as a continuing medical education activity meeting the criteria for seven hours in Category 1 of the Physician’s Recognition Award of the American Medical Association.

This activity has been reviewed and is acceptable for up to 7 prescribed credit hours by the American Academy of Family Physicians.

This activity for 8.4 contact hours is provided by the Institute for Healthcare Communication, which is accredited as a provider of continuing education in nursing by the American Nurses Credentialing Center’s Commission (ANCC) on Accreditation.

Costs
The mission of the Institute for Healthcare Communication is to enhance health outcomes through education, research, and advocacy. Because of its annual grant from Bayer HealthCare Corporation, the Institute is able to keep fees to a minimum to advance this mission.

Workbooks for *Strangers in Crisis* are $25 each.

The Institute
The Institute for Healthcare Communication is a private operating foundation. The Institute is funded through grants and fees from a variety of organizations. The Institute receives annual grants from Bayer HealthCare Corporation to support its efforts.

Institute for Healthcare Communication, Inc.
555 Long Wharf Drive, 13th Floor
New Haven, Connecticut 06511-5901
Tel: (800) 800-5907  Fax: (203) 772-1066
E-mail: info@healthcarecomm.org
http://healthcarecomm.org