Delirium in the ICU

Information for patients in Critical Care and their families

What is delirium?
- A reversible state that causes a patient to quickly become confused
- Can cause a patient to have trouble paying attention, thinking clearly, and knowing what is going on around them
- May cause patients to see or hear things that are not there, but these things seem very real, and are often scary to the patient

Is delirium common in ICU?
- About 2 out of 3 patients in ICUs will have delirium
- About 7 out of 10 patients on a breathing machine will have delirium

What causes delirium?
- A change in the way the brain works due to:
  - less oxygen to the brain
  - certain medications
  - lack of fluids
  - infection
  - severe pain
  - liquor (alcohol), nicotine, or pain killers

Is delirium the same as dementia?
- No.
- Delirium often comes on quickly (hours or days) and often clears up quickly (a few days to a week)
- Dementia can be a lasting state that comes on over months or even years
- Sometimes, patients who have delirium will have dementia-like thinking problems that may last for months after they leave the hospital

What does delirium look like?
- Patients may:
  - be confused, restless, very quiet, violent (aggressive) or fearful
  - use bad (swear) words
  - be unable to follow directions
  - be unsure about where they are
  - be unsure about the date or time of day
  - see or hear things that are not there
  - think or believe things which are not real
  - have changes in sleep habits
  - have movements that are not normal
  - forget things
  - seem to no longer act or look like themselves

How is delirium stopped and fixed?
- Patients are screened in Horizon's ICUs for signs of delirium
- We focus on keeping the patient safe and calm
- We work to find the causes of delirium including:
  - reviewing and changing medications
  - treating infections
  - treating low oxygen levels
  - fixing chemical in the body
  - treating low fluids

How can you help?
- Speak slow and use simple words or phrases
- Remind the patient of the day and date and time
- Talk about things like family members and friends
- Bring patient's glasses and/or hearing aids
- Remind the patient of home with pictures and/or familiar objects
- Provide the patient with their favourite music or TV shows
- Avoid loud noises, a lot of visitors
- Avoid dark room, bright lights, or complete silence
- If your loved one has delirium, you may be asked to sit and help calm them

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