Appendix G:
Further Information on Effective Communication

Verbal Communication
Strategies for effective verbal communication include:

- Focus on main issues and points
- Eye contact
- Setting, time and place
- Agenda
- Emphasise
- Quality and tone
- Summarise.

Handover
Handover and discontinuity are a normal part of today's NHS hospital care. This is an area in which patients are at particular risk from errors. On many occasions poor handover can result in diagnostic and treatment delay. This barrier in patient care can result in near misses and clinical incidents.

To reduce this type of error it is important that written, as well as verbal handover are adequately performed. Structured handover should be employed in clinical practice with dedicated time allocated. At present, nursing staff are more organised and superior at the task of handover compared with other professionals such as doctors.

Non-verbal Communication
Non verbal cues that help communication include:

- Body language (e.g. open posture, relaxed, sitting)
- Maintaining eye contact
- Emotion of speaker and listener (e.g. enthusiastic)
- Other connections between people (e.g. friends, professional similarities, age)
- Attitude and expectations.

Written communication
Written communication is vital to prove professional safe practice. This form of communication remains your single most important account of your actions and in cases of alleged negligence will be the defining factor, especially where cases come to trial years later. Doctors, who can explain fully what they have said and write with the patient present, practice at the highest level.

It is important that written communication can stand the test of time. This means it should be legible not only to yourself but to other health professionals. Often recollections of particulars of a case are impossible with passage of time and high volume of patients to which you provide treatment. Therefore, there is a dependence on the quality of written communication to the defence of decisions taken. Legal experts will scrutinise documents in finite detail and if it was not documented it did not occur!

Being a reflective communicator
Listening

Strategies for effective listening include:

- **Stop** - Stop what you are doing and focus on other person
- **Look** - Give your full attention to the speaker. Pay attention to non-verbal messages
- **Listen** - What are the major points? What are the details? What are the speaker’s ideas and concerns?
- **Ask Questions** - This is to clarify your own understanding.

Environment

A suitable environment can optimise the level of communication. Many aspects of an environment can intrude on listening and learning. Most clinical areas are noisy with many distractions. Therefore aim for:

- Quiet room/area
- Adequate space
- No interruptions

Barriers to Communication

These are factors which prevent vital information being passed from one health professional to another. When this occurs, as in the DVD, mistakes are made and the patient is put at risk.

Verbal

- Lack of clarity
- Lack of confidence
- Making generalised statements
- Attitude
- Lack of knowledge

Non-verbal

- Avoiding eye contact
- Looking elsewhere
- Looking bored/yawning
- Easily distracted
- Closed posture

Written

- Illegible handwriting
- Inappropriate abbreviations
- Not dating, timing and signing notes
- Using poor language
- Not using handover sheets

Listening
• Not being in a position to hear
• Assuming what is being said
• Other things on your mind
• External distractions
• Focusing on personal agenda

Issues Relating to Cross-boundary information sharing
For many professionals there is a constant need to share information across teams and across professional boundaries. We must remember that the sharing of personal information across agency boundaries takes place within a policy framework. Certain policies require the agencies to take steps to safeguard personal data. You will need to become familiar with local policies and information sharing protocols which take into account legislation such as the data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act, the Human Rights Act and the common law duty of confidentiality.

With regard to social work and its ability to share information, there have been some 16 policies introduced since 2002. The importance of developing and enabling effective systems of information exchange has become more important following high level tragic public cases. The Laming Report into the death of Victoria Climbié proposed, ‘improvements to the way information is exchanged within and between agencies if children are to be safeguarded’…each agency must accept responsibility for making sure that information passed to another agency is clear and the recipients should query any points of uncertainty’ (Lord Laming, 2003, page 9). A further report has demanded central government to address inter-organisational information exchange (Bichard Report 2004).