The art of communicating with patients

Surgeons have an incredible understanding of human anatomy and medical procedures, but communicating this knowledge to patients and their families requires an entirely distinct set of skills.

Clinicians are often asked to illustrate the interventions they are describing and, though perfectly comfortable performing lifesaving operations, many are at a loss when it comes to drawing pictures and diagrams.

To bridge this divide between art and science, the RPA Institute of Academic Surgery has established a series of three-day Art in Surgery workshops, including drawing classes from the eminent artist and academic Professor Mike Esson.

Professor Esson is a former artist-in-residence at the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh and a specialist in teaching art to surgeons.

Acting Director of the Institute, Katie McBride, said the workshops were tailored for surgeons and specialist nursing staff in the first instance.

“The workshops will include a range of activities and exercises that will help the participants’ perceptual abilities, observational skills and consideration of the patient’s point of view,” Ms McBride said.

“The intention is not that the clinicians can become better artists, but that they develop their artistic skills to become better clinicians.”

The idea was presented at the latest The Pitch innovation series and has received $5000 from the Health Education and Training Institute to make the program available for Allied Health staff in the future.

“The more patients understand about the treatment they are receiving, the more relaxed and comfortable they will be,” Ms McBride said.

“Improving the communication between clinicians and patients could make a positive difference in a patient’s recovery.”