



## Recognising and responding to clinical deterioration

### Background

The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care was established in 2006 to lead and coordinate national improvements in safety and quality. The focus of the Commission's work is on areas of the health system where current and complex problems or community concerns could benefit from urgent national consideration and action.

Ensuring that patients who deteriorate receive appropriate and timely care is a key safety and quality challenge. Research has consistently shown that there are observable physiological abnormalities prior to adverse events such as cardiac arrest, unanticipated admissions to intensive care and unexpected death. Abnormalities in vital signs such as blood pressure, consciousness, respiratory rate, heart rate, and oxygen saturation are common prior to the occurrence of these serious adverse events. However, there is consistent evidence that these warning signs are not always identified; and if they are, they may not be acted on.

All patients should receive comprehensive care irrespective of their location in the hospital or the time of day. However survival rates from cardiac arrest are lower on weekends and at night, and mortality rates of patients admitted to intensive care from general wards are higher than those admitted from emergency departments or operating theatres, suggesting that these patients are not receiving optimal care prior to their admission.

This situation has been known for some time, and there has been considerable work done over

almost 20 years to improve the care that patients who deteriorate receive. Nonetheless, problems remain. Even though systems have been introduced to better manage these patients, this area needs to remain a priority while patients continue to experience preventable adverse events because their deterioration is not identified or managed properly.

### The Commission's program

In response to these issues the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care has commenced a program with the goal of improving the recognition of and response to clinical deterioration in hospitals and other acute care facilities. This will be achieved by:

- providing a national focus on patients who deteriorate and the systems used to identify them and provide timely and appropriate care
- defining the essential elements of recognising and responding to clinical deterioration
- developing evidence-based tools to improve the recognition of deteriorating patients, and support timely action to address their needs.

The factors that contribute to a failure to recognise and respond appropriately to clinical deterioration are complex and overlapping. They relate to knowledge and skills of staff, the way in which care is delivered, organisational systems, attitudes and communication.



The Commission is not able to address all of these issues and has identified some specific areas of focus. The initiatives in the program take into account the Commission's role, issues that are of particular importance in Australia and where there has been limited work done nationally or internationally.

### Initiatives

The initial priorities of this program are the development of:

1. A nationally agreed consensus statement regarding the essential elements for recognising and responding to clinical deterioration. The statement will address:
  - the importance of providing safe and high quality care to patients who deteriorate in hospitals;
  - systems and processes that are required to recognise these patients, and respond to them appropriately; and
  - organisational systems required to ensure that patients who deteriorate are recognised and responded to.

The statement will be applicable to all patients in an acute care facility, and to services of different size and service mix. The statement will also be the platform on which the other initiatives in this program are based.

2. An implementation guide to support the consensus statement and provide information about how the elements within it can be put into practice for all patients across all acute settings.

The guide will also be developed as a web based tool and will provide guidance for tailoring particular systems for recognising and responding to clinical deterioration to suit characteristics of organisations such as:

- location, size, role, skill mix or resources,
  - patient groups such as maternity and paediatric patients, and
  - specific settings, such as smaller facilities.
3. An evidence-based adult general observation chart that will incorporate features to support the identification of patients who are deteriorating, and prompt action to properly manage these patients.

The observation chart will:

- be designed according to human factors and other relevant principles to support accurate recording of information; and
- incorporate features such as early warning scores to support timely recognition of clinical deterioration.

### Other activities

Other activities that will be conducted as part of this program include:

- Working with a team of researchers to study the prevalence of clinical deterioration in a multi-centre study.
- Convening a national workshop in November 2009 with the NSW Clinical Excellence Commission to showcase solutions to the problem of recognising and responding to clinical deterioration.
- Facilitating an interest group of researchers and practitioners interested in issues concerned with the recognition of and response to paediatric patients who deteriorate.
- Exploring the development of clinical judgment and expertise in recognising clinical deterioration.
- Undertaking surveys of systems and practices for recognising and responding to clinical deterioration.

### Further information

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