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New report finds variation in common procedures across Australia

The management of common health conditions varies considerably depending upon where people live, according to a discussion paper released today by the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (the Commission) and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).

The paper, *Exploring Healthcare Variation in Australia*, examines variation in the rates of several common procedures, such as knee surgery and hysterectomy, undertaken in hospitals during 2010-11. Variation was measured according to where patients lived – specifically, the geographic areas defined by the primary healthcare organisations known as Medicare Locals.

According to Professor Villis Marshall AC, the Commission's Chair, unwarranted variation in health care may mean that some patients are missing out on effective care, or that others are having tests or interventions that are unnecessary or their risks outweigh any potential benefits.

AIHW Chief Executive Officer, Mr David Kalisch, said the findings highlighted some specific areas with high rates of variation that merit further investigation, including knee arthroscopy and hysterectomy.

“While some variation may be due to differences in patients’ needs or preferences, unwarranted variation in healthcare is recognised around the world as an important concern,” Professor Marshall said.

“What these findings really bring home is the importance of patients being fully informed about all of their options when making decisions about their healthcare” Professor Marshall said.

Professor Marshall said that the findings would also be useful for health services and clinicians seeking to improve quality of care, adding that it may also be possible to achieve better value for the healthcare dollar in areas where high variation in tests and interventions were identified.

He encouraged patients to ask for clear information in ways that would enable them to easily weigh up potential benefits and risks of different options when making healthcare decisions.

“Patients who are fully informed about the implications of various options and how these align with their own values will often make different choices about their care,” he said.

Exploring Healthcare Variation in Australia is available for download from the Commission and AIHW websites.

Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care

The Commission is a government agency that leads and coordinates national improvements in safety and quality in health care across Australia. The Commission aims to support health care professionals, organisations and policy makers who work with patients and carers.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) is a national agency set up to provide authoritative information and statistics to promote better health and wellbeing.

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