



6 COMMUNICATING FOR SAFETY

This standard aims to ensure that there is effective communication between patients, carers and families, multidisciplinary teams and clinicians, and across the health service organisation, to support continuous, coordinated and safe care for patients.

The new standard recognises that effective communication is needed throughout patients' care and identifies high-risk times when effective communication is critical.

Why the standard is important

Communication is a key safety and quality issue. Health care involves a team of people: clinicians, nurses, other healthcare professionals, patients, carers and families. It is important that communication between these groups supports the delivery of continuous and safe care. Errors in communication and inadequate documentation of clinical information result in misdiagnosis, inappropriate treatment and poor care outcomes.¹

It is particularly important that systems and processes are in place at times when effective communication and documentation are critical to patient safety – for example, when care is transferred between healthcare personnel or areas. Breakdown in the transfer of information has been identified as one of the most important factors in serious adverse events and is a major preventable cause of patient harm.²

This standard outlines the high-risk times when health service organisations need systems and processes to support effective communication and documentation of essential information. These times include clinical handover at transitions of care, when critical information about a patient's care emerges or changes, and when a patient must be correctly identified and matched to their intended care.

If the standard is in place ...

- There are **systems** for effective and coordinated communication that support the delivery of continuous and safe care for the patient
- Structured communication processes are used when **care is transferred** (between healthcare personnel or areas) to ensure that all relevant patient information is passed on
- Essential information is documented in the patient's **healthcare record**
- Systems to communicate **critical information** and risks when they emerge or change are used to ensure safe patient care
- Systems that correctly **identify** the patient throughout their care are used to ensure that the patient receives the care intended for them.

Changes from the first edition

The second edition of the NSQHS Standards streamlines actions and addresses gaps identified in the first edition.

The Communicating for Safety Standard builds on the existing Clinical Handover Standard. It also draws on the Patient Identification and Procedure Matching Standard from the first edition.

The new standard recognises that communication is critical throughout a patient's care, not just when care is handed over between healthcare personnel or areas. Changes have therefore been made to this standard to address clinical communication more broadly. The second edition of the NSQHS Standards explicitly outlines the high-risk times when effective communication is essential for safe patient care. It describes the systems and processes to support effective communication at all transitions of care:

- when critical information emerges or changes
- to ensure correct patient identification and procedure matching
- to ensure essential information is documented in the patient's healthcare record.

Key steps you can take to prepare for the second edition

- Continue to embed structured clinical handover systems and processes into workflow
- Consider the high-risk times for communication in your service context; it may be helpful to review existing structures and processes to determine whether they meet the organisation's clinical communication needs
- Address gaps by collaborating with the workforce to develop or adapt structures and processes to support effective clinical communication.

Further information

A full copy of the Communicating for Safety Standard, including the criteria and actions required for health service organisations to meet it, is contained in the NSQHS Standards (second edition). The NSQHS Standards (second edition) is available on the website of the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care at www.safetyandquality.gov.au.

The **Advice Centre** provides support on implementing the NSQHS Standards for health service organisations, surveyors and accrediting agencies.

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References

- 1 Jorm CM, White S, Kaneen T. Clinical Handover: critical communications, Medical Journal of Australia 2009;190.
- 2 Wong MC, Yee KC, Turner P. A structured evidence-based literature review regarding the effectiveness of improvement interventions in clinical handover. Sydney: Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care; 2008.

National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards

The National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards were developed by the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care with the Australian Government, state and territory partners, consumers and the private sector. The primary aim of the NSQHS Standards is to protect the public from harm and improve the quality of health care. They describe the level of care that should be provided by health service organisations and the systems that are needed to deliver such care.

The second edition of the NSQHS Standards were released in November 2017. Organisations will be assessed against the new standards from January 2019.