

How consistent care practices improve patient outcomes

Consistency in practice within hospitals provides standardised care that all medical staff can follow, while eliminating confusion caused by different approaches in different hospital areas and within the extended health system. Reduction in confusion leads to a decrease in errors and maintains patient safety.

Inconsistent care practices may occur in the way that nurses, doctors or other healthcare providers deliver patient care. While this is based on their best understanding of the patient's diagnosis and treatment plan, the way care is delivered can vary significantly.

There can also be [differences in expertise among medical staff](#), often due to the wealth of available research which makes it hard to keep pace with the latest trends when recommendations for evidence-based practice change frequently.

Healthcare Management Consultant Craig Hooper says as healthcare facilities expand or become part of a more extensive network it can lead to organisational policies, clinical procedures and operational frameworks that overlap or conflict.

"This duplication may lead to staff uncertainty about which approach is correct, potentially leading to staff dissatisfaction with the hospital's management and governance," he said.

"I still hear Team Leaders saying, 'That's not how we do it here'. This can happen to agency staff, who are not familiar with how a particular hospital does something, but I have also heard it said to clinicians from a different ward.

"I have also seen different health care facilities within the same company operate in very different ways, and their staff are just confused by what is expected of them."

"Although most health care in Australia leads to good outcomes, patients do not always receive the care that is most appropriate for them, and preventable adverse events occur across the Australian health system. Lapses in safety and quality, and unwarranted variation in health care provided to different populations within Australia have substantial costs, in terms of both the effect on people's lives and finances."

Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care. 2018-2019 Annual Report

Developing the most effective and proven ways to treat patients is at the core of [evidence-based practice, which has been modernising and transforming healthcare](#) over the past 15 years. Critical evaluation of research and clinical guidelines supports hospital staff and teams to make important care decisions in a uniform manner and standardise treatments, while still accounting for variety among patients.

Changing care-delivery models, increasing public and professional demand for accountability in safety and quality improvement in health care have also resulted in standardised care practices and improved patient outcomes.

This in turn helps [reduce variability of care](#), eliminates outdated or ineffective practices, improves patient safety, and reduces healthcare costs.

“Organisational culture can also improve, not only by having a clear, shared, documented approach to practice but also by breaking down segmentation that may have been created through different schools of thought and practices,” Mr Hooper said.

“I have seen several organisations that permitted Units to do some things that didn’t align with organisational standards, leading to disgruntled staff and even conflict within the workforce.”

Mr Hooper says having consistent practices in places allows staff to rotate throughout the hospital without being re-orientated each time, reducing the time and resources required, while a system-wide, streamlined approach means fewer clinical practice documents need review.

“Developing standardised approaches to clinical care should be based on [best practice, current research standards](#) and national directives, such as accreditation standards. Regular reviews should leverage contemporary approaches to ensure care provision that is of a high standard.”

“...Avoidable patient harm means that patients suffered not through their illness or a lack of knowledge about treatment, but because of ineffective systems to keep them safe while receiving care. Variability of care indicates that valuable knowledge is not being shared and implemented widely, so that many patients are receiving care that diverges from best practice.”

Report of the Review of Hospital Safety and Quality Assurance in Victoria. October 2016

WHY COMMUNICATION IS IMPORTANT

Healthcare Quality and Safety Specialist Tracy Huegill believes one of the key strategies for improved organisational consistency is effective communication.

“While we have moved beyond sending a blanket email to all staff to inform them about a change, successful stakeholder engagement and change management principles within healthcare lag compared with other industries.

“I recently heard about a significant hospital getting an important software update without the end-users being aware the upgrade was being implemented. The staff were naturally frustrated when they arrived at their workplace to discover a new system had been installed, resulting in time delays as they had to learn how to use the updated software on the fly,” she said.

Healthcare organisations that [promote employee engagement outperform other facilities](#) in areas such as job satisfaction, nurse retention and better patient care experiences.

Ms Huegill says that formal engagement, such as workshops and workgroups should also be balanced with more relaxed “corridor conversations” with team members.

“Indeed, the less formal approach will likely be more accessible for some people and provide them with the opportunity to give feedback that may not otherwise be shared.”

She says additional communication and feedback tools could include posters about the topic within a unit.

“If in doubt, communicate and clarify again. There may be people who seek to undermine attempts to develop streamlined practice arrangements. Sometimes this behaviour occurs to fill a void of knowledge of what, why or how something is being done, so chatter helps fill that information vacuum with ill-informed assumptions.

“Open, frank and honest communication can assist to mitigate this occurring. The communication should have solid content and a level of transparency that informs, educates and, ideally, empowers team members to reflect upon the topic,” Ms Huegill said.

Consistency of practice across the hospital, strengthened by effective communication and stakeholder engagement, ensures that medical staff are aware of their expectations and professional accountabilities, while improving patient care.

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