

Quality standards for emergency departments: a roadmap to excellence

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It is widely acknowledged that emergency departments (EDs) in Australia and around the world face increasing pressure due to growing demand. With growing demand comes other challenges such as improving the patient experience and the continuing need to provide high quality and safe care to patients. The locality of an emergency medical service should not negatively impact on the quality and safety of care provided. This is a challenge in Australia given the spread of the population in rural and remote areas but this can be addressed with agreement on expected standards of care and improved resourcing for these requirements. These standards have been developed and tested with expertise from both metropolitan hospitals and rural settings.

The ED is a complex environment which requires the combined effort of clinical and administrative staff to ensure all patients receive timely and effective care. With this in mind, a collaborative project between the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine, the College of Emergency Nursing Australasia and consumers has been undertaken to develop the Quality Standards for Emergency Departments and hospital based urgent care services. These Quality Standards aim to provide guidance improve the quality of care offered to patients, their families and carers who present to a hospital for urgent care. A wide consultation process resulted in collaborative effort with other colleges and organisations with interest in rural health.

The implementation of quantitative targets in EDs has historically been associated with considerable disadvantages such as difficulty in data collection, or more seriously, care being re-focused to a time target rather than the patient's care pathway. Consequently, in these quality standards a qualitative focus has been used. It was considered that this would enhance compliance for clinicians as it would promote the quality improvement process, rather than the standards being used to measure performance.

These Quality Standards for EDs will offer departments guidance through standards and defined criteria to aspire to without fear of penalties. In this way, it is anticipated that the standards will allow EDs to better engage in quality improvement activities, and influence change from within.