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National Clinical Handover Initiative:

Aged Care Home Transfer to Hospital Envelope

The North East Valley Division of General Practice (NEVDGP) is one of seven organisations across Australia chosen by the Australian Commission on Quality and Safety in Healthcare to improve the safety of patients by improving 'clinical handover' communication.

The one year project led by NEVDGP will trial the use of a 'Transfer to Hospital Envelope'. This is a big, bright yellow resealable envelope in which to put a resident's medical documents and other important information when a resident of an aged care home is transferred to hospital.

The issue

Residents of aged care homes are elderly and may be frail with complex care needs. They often need to go to hospital – usually at short notice and to the Emergency Department, but also for planned admissions or appointments. The transfer of a resident from an aged care home to hospital involves a high risk of communication failure. As with any transfer of care and responsibility of care from one health care setting to another, good communication - clinical handover - is required.

The issue of clinical handover has been identified by aged care homes (ACHs), GPs and hospitals as a significant one. They have described a range of problems such as clinical handover information being too scant, and the 'black hole' into which clinical information may disappear during the handover from the aged care home to the hospital. Hospital Emergency Departments have also reported that, when received, the information may not be what is required. This puts residents' safety at risk. Therefore, making sure that good quality documentation gets to hospital staff is essential.

The solution

Seven Divisions of General Practice have collaboratively developed a tool - the 'Transfer to Hospital Envelope' - to be used as a receptacle for a resident's medical and other important documentation when a resident is transferred to hospital. An important feature of the Envelope is a checklist for aged care home staff of what information should be sent to hospital. This will promote the provision of a standardised set of clinical and other crucial information, while also ensuring residents' privacy.

North East Valley Division of General Practice is the lead agency for the project; other partners are Inner Eastern Melbourne, Melbourne, North West Melbourne, Northern, Western Melbourne and Westgate Divisions of General Practice.

Part of our solution is to develop and implement a system to support the use of the Envelope in aged care homes and hospitals. Our focus within hospitals is the Emergency Department as the most common destination for transfer. The trial of the Envelope will involve 28 aged care homes and 5 major public hospitals supported by the 7 local Divisions of General Practice across inner city, northern and western metropolitan Melbourne. The hospitals are the Austin, Royal Melbourne, Northern, Western and St Vincent's.

The process

The aim of the project is to embed the use of the Envelope into everyday policy and practice for aged care home staff and hospital staff within Emergency Departments. Current practices for transfer of documentation in the 28 aged care homes will be identified, a generic policy and an audit tool will be developed. The audit tool will 'track' use of the envelope in the 28 aged care homes, and receipt of it in the Emergency Departments of 5 public hospitals. Work with hospitals will include promoting awareness of the Envelope. A policy for regular monitoring/auditing of resident transfers to hospital ED and use of the Envelope will be developed. Evaluation and dissemination of project results will also be undertaken.

Potential for National applicability

As the trial covers half of metropolitan Melbourne, this is an excellent opportunity to ascertain if the Envelope could work across the rest of Australia. In these complex times, the envelope is a simple, highly visible, cheap, commonsense and useful solution which has the potential to significantly improve the medical care of older people.