

Ensuring the delivery of quality health care

TO THE EDITOR: The recent episode of claimed medical mismanagement resulting in a woman miscarrying in a toilet in the emergency department of the Royal North Shore Hospital in New South Wales has attracted much attention. Politicians played the usual blame game, with the opposition accusing the government of inadequate resource allocation, while those in power blamed the hospital management. The co-director of the hospital's Trauma Unit claimed that the overcrowding in the emergency department was compounded by inexperienced doctors working unsupervised.¹

So, where lies the problem? The focus generally tends to be on the underfunding and the need for more hospital beds, nurses, and doctors. Doctors and nurses work within a system, and without examining the system as a whole, it is not possible to isolate the problem. Availability of human resources and infrastructure, albeit crucial to the delivery of quality care, is only one aspect of the system. The World Health Organization Health Systems Performance Framework identifies five functions that determine health outcomes. The five functions — stewardship (governance and leadership), human resources, information and knowledge, financing, and service provision — come together to provide responsive, quality, safe, and effective health care.² Detecting a problem needs all five functions assessed, and monitoring is required to ensure ongoing quality care.

Much of the information collected and used as performance indicators in the health system is information collected for administrative reasons and includes the number of presentations, separations, and waiting times at the emergency department or for elective surgery. More recently, there have been trends to examine compliance with disease-specific clinical performance indicators that guide clinicians in the delivery of evidence-based best practice. These focus on particular aspects of the health system and are not by themselves sufficient to ensure the delivery of quality care. The National

Health Performance Framework includes a health system framework to assist in the delivery of quality health care to improve the health of all Australians.³ The nine dimensions constituting the framework examine whether care provided is effective, appropriate, efficient, responsive, accessible, safe, continuous, capable, and sustainable. All nine dimensions must be assessed and monitored.

Certainly, dollars and resources are important in ensuring quality health care. Equally important is the need to use available resources effectively and to provide the necessary support mechanisms for the system to function efficiently and effectively. Inefficient health care systems are costly,⁴ and there is evidence to suggest that introducing comprehensive quality improvement programs can result in improved quality of care with minimal staffing adjustments, despite increased patient volume.⁵

Changes need to happen from within; health professionals must drive the need for a changed approach to quality assurance, particularly at a time when the health system is challenged with increasing demand and decreasing resources. The impact of addressing an issue in isolation of the system within which it arises has the potential to impact adversely on another component of the system. Regular checks of the system within which health care is delivered will help ensure that the system is operating well to deliver optimal care to all Australians.

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3 National Health Performance Committee. National Health Performance Framework Report – a report to the Australian Health Ministers' Conference. Brisbane: Queensland Health, 2001. Available at: <http://>

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4 Krugman P, Wells R. The health care crisis and what to do about it [review]. *The New York Review of Books* 2006; 53(5).

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(Received 4/10/07, accepted 14/11/07)

