EXPAND NURSES' ROLE IN PRIMARY CARE: IT WON'T HURT A BIT
POLICY DIRECTION FOR EMERGENCY MENTAL HEALTH TRIAGE

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Clients with physical injury and illness presenting to emergency departments (ED's) across Australia are triaged against the Australasian Triage Scale (ATS). Clients with mental illness presenting to ED's across Australia are assessed by staff using one of four mental health triage scales (MHTS) commonly in use across Australia. These include:

- the ATS with mental health descriptors;
- the Victorian emergency department Mental Health Triage Tool (Potter and Huckson 2006);
- the South Eastern Sydney Area Health Service (SESAHS) MHTS (Tobin et al. 1999); and
- the Royal Hobart MHTS (Smart et al. 1999).

The individual triage scales listed were developed around the same time as the revised ATS incorporating mental health descriptors was being developed by the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine. As a result ED's were able to use the new ATS (with mental health descriptors) to assess clients with mental illness without referring to other specialised MHTS (Broadbent et al. 2007).

Despite the widespread use in Australia of MHTS tools other than the ATS, (Broadbent et al. 2004; Smart et al. 1999) no valid reason has so far been presented to support a move away from the use of ATS for mental health triage in emergency departments. However research shows the use of the ATS, as it relates to mental health presentations, "demonstrates poor inter-rater reliability, and reliability is impacted on by factors unrelated to clinical presentation" (Creton et al. 2006 p.2). This finding is significant as it questions the accuracy of mental health triage assessments made using the ATS and may affect client waiting times. It also suggests an impact on clinical outcomes as well as misrepresenting ED workload and data used to measure performance.

There is clearly a need to review the use of the mental health component of the ATS and move toward a national policy approach to emergency mental health triage by adopting a specialised MHTS. This would ensure clients with mental illness receive the same quality triage assessment currently provided to clients with physical illness and injury.

REFERENCES


