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Enhanced patient assessment skills

Background

The National Consensus Statement: Essential Elements for Recognising and Responding to Clinical Deterioration states that “measurable physiological abnormalities occur prior to adverse events such as cardiac arrest, unanticipated admission to intensive care and unexpected death. These signs can occur both early and late in the deterioration process. Regular measurement and documentation of physiological observations is an essential requirement for recognising clinical deterioration.”

Physiological observations include respiratory rate, oxygen saturation, heart rate, blood pressure, temperature and level of consciousness.

The aim of the Enhanced Patient Assessment Skills program was to educate undergraduate healthcare students in the importance of accurate recording of the above physiological observations, and the underlying principles to ensure deterioration is identified earlier and response systems implemented thus improving the quality of care for patients. The COMPASS program developed by ACT Health was selected.

COMPASS is an interdisciplinary education program designed to enhance understanding of patient deterioration and the significance of altered observations. It also seeks to improve communication between health care professionals and enhance timely management of patients.

The COMPASS program is a blended model, with an online learning package to be completed prior to a three-hour face-to-face education session.

Problems/drivers

Research has shown in many instances that patient deterioration has not identified in the first instance, and continues to progress until the patient is seriously ill. Issues of concern are:

* Over-reliance on technology when assessing patients,
* Physiological observations poorly analysed and related to patient’s condition,
* Lack of a standardised handover for communication between healthcare professionals,

Undergraduate students did need coaching from clinical teachers in performing vital signs manually and being confident in their assessments.

One of the key drivers for change was the National Standards for Accreditation, especially Standard 9: Managing the Deteriorating Patient. On review of current education programs to address these problems, the COMPASS program designed by ACT health was chosen as it linked assessment skills to underlying theory and provided a means of escalating patient care that can be easily followed by students and staff.

Arriving at a solution

The COMPASS program has allowed the establishment of a formal process for the provision of clinical skills education to the undergraduate students both within South West Healthcare and across the region and reinforces to existing staff members of the importance of accurate patient assessment and the linkage of physiology to patient’s vital signs.

The development of an Enhanced Patient Assessment Skills program that allows for staff and students to participate in the same training in the same environment ensures the same message is being delivered across all disciplines. The development of the Enhanced Patient Assessment Skills scenarios utilised in the program has facilitated the opportunity for staff and students to engage in training in a non-pressurised simulated clinical environment. The education has been embraced by the undergraduate students, especially nursing and medical but the content will need to be reviewed to make more relevant to allied health students as well as applicable to the mental health setting.

The program has also fostered the continued development of communication and knowledge sharing between healthcare institutions and education providers at a local level and has been instrumental in improving compliance with activation of existing patient safety systems such as the Medical Emergency Team (MET), largely due to the increased recognition of patient deterioration with the concurrent introduction of the new Adult Observation Charts.

It has been extremely pleasing to see undergraduate students taking the lead at times in notifying senior clinicians of patient deterioration, and implementing a MET call, and being actively involved at the bedside during this episode of patient care.

Implementation process

An invitation was sent to local rural and regional hospitals within the immediate vicinity to be involved in this project. The education focused on enhancing patient assessment skills to students. Current staff was included in the education to ensure consistency of practice and theory delivered to students during their clinical placements. Educators from ACT Health came to South West Healthcare and provided initial education to key stakeholders (partner organisations, education providers and key clinicians responsible for education of students).

The observation charts were designed, trialled and refined over a three-month period until all concerned were satisfied with the final draft. The Paediatric Ward will use the specific chart currently being released and the Maternity Ward is using the version for midwifery patients. Students study midwifery or double degree students as well as medical students were educated in the use of these specific charts.

The educators targeted the start of each clinical placement to educate nursing and medical students on patient deterioration. This continues to occur, with an online program developed and follow up in the clinical skills lab during their placement.

Outcomes

* Terang and Mortlake Health Service as well as the Camperdown Campus, South West Healthcare developed the MEWS policy for rural hospitals and use the observation chart.
* All nursing undergraduate students complete the online COMPASS program prior to commencement of placement and have follow-up during placement in the skills lab.
* Interdisciplinary education with our graduate nurses/interns and critical care students is only just beginning and is very much in its infancy, but is an area keen to grow.
* All undergraduates using ISBAR as a communication tool during their placements to handover patient information and patient deterioration.

Enhanced knowledge and skills in patient assessment by undergraduates, with undergraduates demonstrating knowledge in interpreting the data and knowing when to instigate a medical review or MET call. This may include notifying the appropriate member of staff such as their clinical teacher or the ANUM in charge of the ward.

Barriers

One of the concerns from an education provider was that this may cause stress to first-year nursing students. This had the potential to undermine the program. First-year nursing students undertake three-week placements at South West Healthcare and do need to be educated regarding patient deterioration and the Modified Early Warning System and MET calls. The education provider was concerned that this education would be stressful for the students. Agreement was reached to provide the education program to the first-year students as it was felt they would be better prepared for the clinical environment. It has been shown that this concern did not eventuate and all students have been fully engaged in the education.

The Enhance Patient Assessment Skills program targeted undergraduate healthcare students which allowed for the collaborative education of students and staff from a regional perspective. Initially, the limited availability of resources within the various organisations did impede the number of students who could access the program.

The large scope of the project was ambitious in its intention to introduce a new system from not only an organisational point of view but also include regional hospitals, necessitating an engenderment of cultural change across the many disciplines working within the system. This was coupled with the hurdles of the practical development of a new system to be installed as well as the development of the SLE scenarios and education tools to be utilised within the program.

The ambitious nature of the program to include other regional and rural hospital did have limits including FTE required by the project worker to undertake this requirement, especially in regard to the networking and in house education.

The development of an online education program accessible to student proved challenging. South West Healthcare has a learning management system which is for employees only. Students were able to access the COMPASS program via the up the education webpage.

An emerging problem that is becoming a major hurdle concerns the electronic record and how the observation chart and MEWS system can be incorporated into this. Two of the regional hospitals opted out of the program based on this factor. A working party with key stakeholders and SWARH is currently working toward a resolution of this problem.

Future directions

Learning from other SLE initiatives, South West Healthcare would like to be able to run these scenarios in the clinical areas (i.e. a roaming manikin on a trolley). This may be more realistic for clinicians and give undergraduates an insight into how these scenarios function in the ‘real-world’.

The Enhancing Patient Assessment Skills program will continue and areas for further development include allied health students and mental health. Interdisciplinary education with nursing, medical and allied health students is an area that can grow. The fitting of audiovisual equipment into the clinical skills lab will be of benefit to students providing instant feedback and debriefing when involved in clinical simulation.

Further Information

**Jenice Smart**

**Education Manager**

South West Healthcare

03 5563 1633

[jsmart@swh.net.au](mailto:jsmart@swh.net.au)