

Title: A qualitative study of problems encountered when arranging interhospital transfer from a metropolitan hospital Emergency Department

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Objective

To explore staff perspectives of the transfer process and clinical or organisational problems involved in arranging interhospital transfers (IHTs).

Method

This qualitative descriptive study involved semi-structured interviews of senior Emergency Department (ED) clinicians (n=11) with expert knowledge and experience of IHT in the Perth metropolitan area. Participants were selected from tertiary and non-tertiary EDs and the Royal Flying Doctor Service which undertakes some ED critical care transfers in the area. Transcripts were subject to thematic content analysis with problems subsequently related to stages of the IHT process.

Results

Transfer processes are complex, involve multiple staff and can be resource intensive. Problems centred around the demands associated with communication, coordination and conduct of IHT, particularly in the critically-ill. The number of telephone calls involved, difficulties accessing staff with decision-making authority, the referral handover, the time taken to gain transfer acceptance and resources required to maintain appropriate levels of patient care, including the provision of critical care escorts were key areas of concern. Some problems impacted on transfer efficiency.

Conclusion

Transfer processes are complex and require substantial resources. In addition to clinical expertise, clinicians must possess good interpersonal and negotiating skills to overcome problems that arise. Efforts to streamline processes to ensure decision-making staff are involved in the process can assist in improving efficiency and support equitable access to healthcare for all patients.