

Improving Safety in Family Practices

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Poster Abstract for Health & Safety Canada 2006 IAPA Conference & Trade Show

While family practice providers strive to deliver high quality and safe care to their patients, no yardstick exists at present to measure how safely the care is being provided. As the health care system and the health care needs of patients increase in complexity, a framework that supports achieving the best and safest possible care in this challenging environment is vital.

The *Quality* in Family Practice project is an exploratory study designed to recommend an interprofessional assessment tool and program for use in family practices in Ontario. The *Quality* Assessment Tool identifies the key areas in family practice that can assist practice teams to provide a high standard of accessible, safe and effective care for their patients. The Assessment Tool promotes continuous quality improvement (CQI) through 80 indicators, which define the key areas in family practice for providing optimum patient care. Each indicator contains a set of criteria, which are the elements of care that can be measured in order to assess the indicator. Of the 80 indicators in the tool, 38 (48%) directly address safety issues. (To review the *Quality* Assessment Tool see www.qualityinfamilypractice.com)

The indicators are organized into five key areas (sections) in family practice: (A) factors affecting patients; (B) physical factors affecting the practice; (C) clinical practice systems; (D) practice and patient information management; (E) continuous quality improvement and continuing professional development and quality of work life.

Safety is an important component of the Assessment Tool, with an entire section (B) allocated to safety and security issues for practices, practice team members and patients. This section promotes safe physical facilities of a high standard, with safe access for patients, providers and staff. Indicators in this section include those that measure the comfort, safety and privacy of examination areas; disinfection/sterilization procedures; safe disposal of sharps and biomedical waste; Cold Chain procedures; fire safety; commitment to the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act 1997; and proper maintenance of medical equipment and resources. The Assessment Tool facilitates the development of procedures for identifying, assessing and controlling hazards in family practices by assisting the practice team to: set goals for health and safety; establish formal operating plans and procedures; ensuring responsibilities are understood; and measuring performance against objectives.

Safety indicators found in other sections of the Assessment Tool include medication monitoring, reduction of medical errors, reporting of adverse events, and avoidance of system failures.

In order to ultimately improve levels of safety within family practice, health care providers require a tool and process that allows them to assess the safety of care being provided and that encourages them, in a supportive and non-threatening manner, to improve the quality and safety of care that they are providing. At present, no such tool exists in Canada. This project represents a significant step towards achieving this goal. Feedback and commentary is encouraged for further enhancement of the safety features of this project.