

NEWS

New standards in Ireland aim to improve safety and quality of health services

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New national standards aimed at protecting patients and radically improving health services in Ireland, and which will form the basis for future licensing of all healthcare facilities, have been launched by the Health Information and Quality Authority.¹

The new standards follow a number of high profile failures in the health system, including a year long investigation into the running of Tallaght Hospital's emergency department in Dublin after an inquest into the death of a patient who died in a corridor while waiting for a bed. It found Thomas Walsh was the victim of an abdication of responsibility for his care while he was being transferred from one part of the health system to another.

There are 45 new standards to ensure service providers protect patients from risk and harm and inform them of adverse events. They take immediate effect under Section 8 of the Health Act 2007. Every service, including hospitals, general practices, and ambulance services, is expected to use the new standards to improve services for patients.

Standard 2.4 states: "An identified healthcare professional has overall responsibility and accountability for a service user's care during an episode of care." It is hoped that with standard 2.4 in place there will be no doubt as to who is responsible for a patient such as Walsh, who has been admitted to hospital but who is waiting in the emergency department for a bed to become free.

In another case Ennis general hospital was found in 2009 to have failed to act on abnormal test results of a breast cancer patient, Ann Moriarty, which strongly suggested a recurrence

of her cancer. The relevant Standard (2.6) is designed to prevent a recurrence of Ms Moriarty's poor care: "The people providing your healthcare have the necessary skills and experience to provide safe care for you as they regularly care for people with the same or similar condition; the service only delivers those services that it knows it can deliver safely and effectively; and if the service where you are currently receiving care is unable to meet your healthcare needs, you will be supported to access a different service that can provide the necessary care."

At the launch of the Standards, HIQA chief executive Tracey Cooper said, "Patients will have a clear expectation of the standard of care they can expect to receive and service providers will be clear on what is expected of them. The standards provide, for the first time, a national and consistent approach to improving safety, quality, and reliability in our health service."

The new standards are a first step towards a licensing system for the Irish healthcare system, both public and private. From early next year, hospitals and clinics can expect inspection visits to assess their compliance. In future, health service failures will be judged by how closely those concerned adhered to the new standards.

1 Health Information and Quality Authority. National standards for safer better healthcare. June 2012. www.hiqa.ie/standards/health/safer-better-healthcare

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