

Position Statement

TRIAGE NURSE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this position statement is to define the role of the triage nurse and the minimum triage nurse practice standards. The aim is to promote national triage consistency in the application of the Australasian Triage Scale (ATS). It is acknowledged that triage may be performed in a number of settings other than an Emergency Department. However, the College of Emergency Nursing Australasia Ltd. (CENA) produces this position statement to define the role and practice of triage nurses working in Emergency Departments offering 24hour triage services.

Triage is the first point of clinical contact for all people presenting to the Emergency Department and the point at which care begins. Triage is a brief clinical assessment that determines the clinical urgency of the patient's presenting problem and culminates with the allocation of an ATS category, which determines the time and sequence in which they receive emergency care. 'Although primarily a clinical tool for ensuring that patients are seen in a timely manner, commensurate with their clinical urgency, the ATS is also a useful casemix measure. The scale directly relates triage code with a range of outcome measures (inpatient length of stay, ICU admission, mortality rate) and resource consumption (staff time, cost). It provides an opportunity for analysis of a number of performance parameters in the Emergency Department (casemix, operational efficiency, utilisation review, outcome effectiveness and cost)'.¹

RATIONALE FOR ROLE

The role of the triage nurse is central to the effective and efficient operation of the Emergency Department. Emergency Departments are routinely unpredictable settings. The finite resources of the Emergency Department emphasizes the need for timely and accurate triage decisions that ultimately underpin optimal health service delivery.

POSITION

Triage is an autonomous nursing role and essential to patient safety and the efficient delivery of emergency care. Clinical decisions made by triage nurses require complex cognitive process. The Triage Nurse must demonstrate the capacity for critical thinking in environments where available data is limited, incomplete or ambiguous. The quality and accuracy of triage decisions are central to appropriate clinical care. In some models of care, triage may include

a medical officer in a triage team. CENA endorses the concept that Triage must be attended to by no less than a triage qualified Registered Nurse.*

The ability to undertake effective and efficient triage is dependent on extensive knowledge and experience with a wide range of illness and injury patterns. As such, it is the position of CENA that triage and the role of Triage Nurse be undertaken by specifically trained and experienced registered nurses.*

The decisions of triage nurses should as far as possible be evidence-based and demonstrate best-practice standards. All triage decisions are to be based on clinical urgency of the patients presenting problems, and not determined by factors such as departmental workload and funding.

CENA endorses a set of minimum standards for the triage nurse, triage practice and the triage environment:

Standard 1: Clinical practice

The Role of the Triage Nurse is to:

- i. Undertake patient assessment and allocate the ATS category based on;
 - a. Findings of the primary survey
 - b. Risk assessment
- ii. Initiate appropriate nursing interventions and organisational guidelines (e.g. first aid and emergency interventions) to improve patient outcomes and secure the safety of patients and staff of the department;
- iii. Ensure continuous reassessment and management of patients who remain in the waiting room commensurate with their condition and time frames determined by the ATS category;
- iv. Provide patient and public education where appropriate to facilitate
 - a. health promotion and education
 - b. injury prevention
 - c. community resourcing and information
- v. Act as the liaison for members of the public and other health care professionals

Standard 2: Education, Training and Professional Development

The Triage Nurse:

- a. is a qualified and experienced registered nurse* who demonstrates and maintains clinical expertise in emergency nursing prior to undertaking the role of triage nurse;

* Registered Nurse refers to Division 1 in Victoria

- b. successfully completes a comprehensive triage education program prior to commencing the triage role;
- c. participates in research processes to audit and evaluate triage practice;
- d. participates in annual education, training and professional development in triage and related emergency nurse and emergency care activities

All triage nurse education programs must as far as possible be appropriately reviewed and endorsed by the hospital executive or state health department, and if outside of these areas by the relevant professional groups. CENA recommends the following theoretical and practice elements as core components of triage nurse training:

- i. history, science and practice of triage
- ii. the Australian health care system
- iii. the role of the Triage Nurse
- iv. the Australasian Triage Scale (ATS)
- v. effective communication skills
- vi. legislative requirements and considerations
- vii. epidemiology and population health
- viii. primary and secondary surveys
- ix. assessment and triage decision making by presentation type
 - a. trauma
 - b. medical and surgical emergencies
 - c. paediatric emergencies
 - d. obstetric and gynaecological emergencies
 - e. mental health emergencies
 - f. rural and isolated triage practice
 - g. environmental emergencies
- x. quality and safety in health care

CENA endorses the use of the Emergency Triage Education Kit (ETEK) as a resource book for nurse educators to promote the consistent application of the Australasian Triage Scale (ATS). The development of this resource was first funded in 2001 by the Department of Health and Ageing, and reviewed in 2007 in collaboration with the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine, the Australian College of Emergency Nursing, the College of Emergency Nursing Australasia and the Council of Remote Area Nurses Australia.^{II}

Standard 3: Equipment and Environment

The triage environment must provide safety for the public, the triage nurse, staff and patients of the Emergency Department and the hospital. The environment:

- a. must be immediately accessible and well sign posted
- b. must have access to an area for patient examination and primary treatment
- c. must be designed to maximize the safety of the triage nurse, staff and patients (e.g. duress alarms, access to security personnel)

- d. must be equipped with emergency equipment
- e. must enable care to be provided with due regard to standard and additional precautions for infection control and prevention
- f. should enable and facilitate patient privacy

This Position Statement on Triage Nurse should be read in conjunction with the Policy on the Australasian Triage Scale, published by the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine.

REFERENCES

- I. Australasian College for Emergency Medicine. *P06 - Policy on the Australasian Triage Scale*. Melbourne: Australasian College for Emergency Medicine; 2006. Available from http://www.acem.org.au/media/policies_and_guidelines/P06_Aust_Triage_Scale_-_Nov_2000.pdf
- II. Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. Emergency Triage Education Kit (ETEK). Canberra, Australian Government. 2007.

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