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Inertia on healthcare standards

Clara Pirani
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THE rate of medical errors and preventable complications in hospitals has not improved over the past five years despite a campaign to deal with the problem.

A government review of healthcare has found hospitals and health services have failed to implement many of the safety initiatives created by the Australian Council for Safety and Quality in Health Care.

The council was set up in 2000 to improve healthcare standards, with \$55million in federal and state funding to last until July next year.

The review team perceived a degree of frustration among many stakeholders that important policy decisions endorsed by ministers were not always effectively implemented, and that clinical best practice, where it is identified and disseminated, is not always utilised," the review team's report stated.

"As a result, it was asserted by many that there is little evidence that Australia has made any measurable progress in improving safety and quality since the (1995) Quality in Australian Health Care Study."

That study found that 18,000 Australians died every year from adverse events, the most serious being post operative infections and reactions to drugs.

In December a federal government report revealed 260,000 adverse events occurred in Australian hospitals in 2001-02 including 7531 mishaps caused by accidental cuts, perforations and lacerations during surgery.

The review team, led by New Zealand health and disability commissioner Ron Paterson examined about 80 submissions from healthcare groups and individuals.

The review team praised the council for raising awareness of safety issues but concluded a greater effort was needed to develop national healthcare standards and ensure standards were implemented.

In response, Australian health ministers have announced that a new body, called the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, will replace the existing council next year.

The commission will be expected to collect national data on hospital-acquired infections, medical errors and patient falls.

However, health professionals have questioned whether the commission would have greater success than the existing council, which has no power to force hospitals to improve patient care and struggled to get state governments to agree on national standards.

"The Australian Health Care Association, while still waiting on details about the new commission, believes it may not have sufficient power to ensure effective safety and

quality in healthcare facilities including the establishment of national data collections," said Prue Power, executive director of the Australian Healthcare Association, which represents public hospitals.

The review team decided against recommending a national regulator but recognised that "the risk in not having a regulatory body is that action fails to happen".

Federal secretary of the Australian Nursing Federation Jill Iliffe said safety systems would be more readily adopted if more medical professionals, nurses in particular, were consulted.

"The majority of the 200,000 nurses working in Australia have not been exposed directly or even indirectly to the work of the council."

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