

IDENTIFYING AND MANAGING RISK FACTORS WHEN CARING FOR INTOXICATED PATIENTS IN THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT

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Introduction: Within Australia, up to a quarter of emergency department presentations are related to acute drug or alcohol intoxication. This patient group frequently display a range of challenging behavioural issues which significantly increase the burden on emergency staff. The following case study is relevant for health care clinicians managing intoxicated patients in acute care settings.

Approach: This case study concerns one of five patients that regularly presents to emergency departments in WSLHD. They present highly intoxicated, bring alcohol into the department, and frequently consume alcohol as an inpatient.

Key Findings: Data collected across WSLHD refers specifically to one patient who presented intoxicated to the district on 71 occasions within 12 months. Blood alcohol levels ranged from 0.22% to 0.43%. On 36 occasions, the patient discharged against medical advice or left without notice from the department. On 10 occasions, alcohol was found in belongings or the patient left the hospital to purchase alcohol. In the absence of current best practice guidelines, there continues to be inconsistent practice at point of care, putting staff and patients at significant risk of harm.

Discussions and Conclusions: This case study highlights the current lack of guidelines related to safe discharge of an intoxicated patient. Questions remain regarding what constitutes a safe blood alcohol level for discharge, as well as ethical mechanisms to contain intoxicated patients until they are safe for discharge (e.g., safe/sobering up rooms; mechanical/chemical restraint).

Implications for Practice or Policy: This case study highlights the need for State-wide guidelines/policy that can assist multidisciplinary clinicians to provide best practice, safe and quality care to acutely intoxicated patients. Utilising a guideline/policy would also assist in mitigating a number of organisational risks for clinicians providing care to this vulnerable patient group.

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