

12 May 2014

Dr Que Lam
Chair
RCPA-AACB Critical Laboratory Results Working Party
Via email: que.lam@austin.org.au

Dear Dr Lam

Consensus statement for the management of laboratory results that pose high risk to patients and require timely communication

The Health Consumers Alliance (HCA) is the peak body for health consumers in South Australia. As an independent alliance of health consumers and health consumer organisations, we work together with our members to achieve our vision of consumers at the heart of health care. A strong and effective voice for the promotion and protection of health consumer wellbeing and rights, HCA promotes health equity and provides systemic advocacy to inform, shape and sustain consumer centred care. Engagement with health consumers and health consumer organisations informs all the work conducted by HCA.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft Consensus Statement for the management of laboratory results that pose high risk to patients and require timely communication. It is disappointing that health consumers and health consumer organisations have only been consulted on the draft Statement at the end of the process, rather than having been partners in the development of the Statement from the start.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide Australasian pathology laboratories and users of their services with guidance on how to design shared policies and procedures for the management of high risk results in order to improve the effectiveness and safety of care delivered to patients. The recommendations within this consensus statement are expected to facilitate harmonisation in the management of high risk results notification in Australasia, ensuring that all laboratories achieve best practice. This should enable benchmarking leading to further improvements in the quality of service delivery. These are all worthy goals for the Consensus Statement which HCA supports.

The proposed Consensus Statement and the Key Recommendations take a systems approach to the management of laboratory results that are high risk. This is appropriate given the nature of pathology collection and the multiple providers that may be involved in a health consumer's journey. HCA considers this to be such an important issue for health consumers that we recommend consideration be given to incorporating the Key Recommendations of the Consensus Statement into accreditation of pathology services as overseen by the National Pathology Accreditation Advisory Council.

Level 1, 12 Pirie Street
Adelaide SA 5000

GPO Box 2248
Adelaide SA 5001

t: 08 8231 4169
f: 08 8410 5276
e: info@hcasas.asn.au
w: www.hcasas.asn.au
twitter: healthconsumers
abn: 90 294 720 079



Partnering with Consumers

The National Safety and Quality Goals, Safety and Quality Framework and the new National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards all place importance on partnering with consumers. Effective partnering requires appropriate access to health information for both practitioners and consumers. Appropriate access to test results would empower consumers to be active partners in their treatment, care and disease management and provide another avenue of communication of important health information between health providers. While there are some examples of good practice in Australia regarding the effective communication of health information, generally the picture is haphazard and serious delays in treatment and care can occur. The draft Statement would be enhanced by reference to the National Safety and Quality Goals, Safety and Quality Framework and the new National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards and specifically acknowledging the importance of partnering with consumers.

Identification of Health Consumers and Health Consumer Rights

The proposed Statement would be enhanced with explicit identification health consumers in the document (instead of being included in the vague phrase – users of services). Further the identification of the rights of health consumers and carers to access their test results and reference to the Australian Charter of Healthcare Rights would significantly enhance the Statement.

Consumer Access to Test Results

Many consumers in Australia want access to their test results and find it difficult to obtain from their GP, hospital or private specialist visits. As identified by the Consumers Health Forum of Australia in a series of consultations in 2009:

Almost all consumers indicated they would like a copy of their test results to be provided to them at no cost, and thought this could reduce some communication problems. Consumers argued that seeing a copy of the test results enables them to ask more appropriate questions. They also said that this would help them to feel more engaged in their healthcare.

(Consumers Health Forum, 2010, p 4¹)

This is an important issue for health consumers; the unnecessary delay in receipt, review and communication of laboratory results have too often resulted in increased severity of illness and contributed to premature and avoidable death of Australians. While not all health consumers want their test results, it is important to involve consumers in a meaningful way in their treatment and care. Direct access to test results can be critical to avoid delayed action when significant results are overlooked or lost or appointments deferred. HCA is aware of individual cases where

¹ Consumers Health Forum of Australia, 2010. Quality Use of Pathology Consumer Consultation Project – Draft Summary of Consultation Results, Workshops Report and Literature Scoping Study.



such lack of communication has resulted in delay initiation of treatment, and this has ended with disastrous results for the consumers and their families.

A simple step that may prevent such delays is to automatically provide a copy of results to health consumers and/or their carers as is current practice in France and parts of the United States. Such a move is supported by the emerging knowledge and evidence on consumer centred care, health literacy and patient activation. The provision of test results to consumers also supports consumer health literacy and self-management of chronic diseases, resulting in positive health outcomes through improved treatment compliance.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft Consensus Statement for the management of laboratory results that pose high risk to patients and require timely communication. This is an important issue for health consumers in Australia, and an area of practice in which there is much opportunity for improvement. We encourage the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia, the Australasian Association of Clinical Biochemists, pathology services and health practitioners to embrace the concept of partnering with consumers to improve safety and quality in the health system.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Cousins'.

Michael Cousins
Manager, Policy and Advocacy

HCA acknowledges the assistance of Cancer Voices SA in the development of this submission.

