

*Professional practice and innovation:***Identifying and flagging children and young people under state guardianship on the Patient Administration System (PAS)**

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Abstract

In December 2006 a data matching trial was undertaken in partnership between Women's and Children's Hospital (WCH) and Families South Australia (SA), the state child welfare agency, to identify children and young people under guardianship of the Minister for Families and Communities with those already registered on the WCH Patient Administration System (PAS). By identifying this group of children, a priority health response could be initiated to improve their health and wellbeing. The data supplied by Families SA identified 1,683 children currently under guardianship. Data were compared against the WCH PAS, which identified that 72% ($n = 1,212$) of these matched with patients who were already registered on the PAS. There were 28% ($n = 471$) that did not match; these individuals were registered on the PAS so that if they did present to the hospital the appropriate measures could be taken to ensure they received the necessary treatment and follow-up.

Keywords (MeSH):

Data Collection; Children; Social Protection; Foster Home Care; Legal Guardians

Supplementary keyword:

Patient Administration System

Introduction

Children, Youth and Women's Health Service (CYWHS) is one of four health regions in South Australia. CYWHS provides state-wide acute and community based services to neonates, children, young people and women throughout South Australia.

In 2005 CYWHS commenced an across-government partnership project with Families SA (the state child welfare agency) to improve services for children and young people under guardianship of the Minister. The aim was to develop a set of statewide *Health Standards for Children and Young People under the Guardianship of the Minister* (South Australia. Children's, Youth and Women's Health Service 2007) that established agreed benchmarks in providing services for guardianship children between two Government sectors, the Health and the Welfare systems. As part of the project CYWHS was the trial site to identify and flag guardianship status on WCH PAS. The identification and flagging process was seen as

being essential in order to identify children under guardianship and provide a priority response.

Policy context

In 2003 the South Australian Government released the *Layton Report: Our Best Investment* by Robert Layton QC (Layton 2003)¹. *The Layton Report* is a state plan to protect and advance the interests of children. It examined a range of issues including the relationships between: socioeconomic disadvantage and child abuse and neglect; historical context of child protection in SA; early intervention and prevention frameworks and services; interagency coordination and relationships in providing services for children; mandatory reporting of child protection; and child protection in education services and legislation affecting child protection. The outcome of the report was a range of recommendations and

¹ www.decs.sa.gov.au/speced2/files/links/link_66688.pdf

strategies to advance the interests of children and families.

In 2004 the *Keeping Them Safe*² program was released. *Keeping Them Safe* was a five-year reform program for child protection and was one of the Government's responses to the Layton Review. The need for improved outcomes for children and young people under guardianship of the Minister was one of the key reform priorities of *Keeping Them Safe*.

In South Australia there are approximately 1,600³ children and young people under the guardianship of the Minister ranging in age from birth to 18 years. These children and young people are placed by the Youth Court under a care and protection order with guardianship authority vested in the Minister for Families and Communities and delegated to Families SA, a division within the Department for Families and Communities. The children and young people are generally placed with carers who most commonly are foster carers, but increasingly may be a relative or kinship carer, or they may be placed in residential care. Care and protection orders under which these children and young people are placed include:

- Guardianship under section 38 of the Children's Protection Act:
 - 12-month guardianship orders
 - guardianship until 18 years of age
 - 12-month custody orders.
- Unaccompanied refugee minors without parents, for whom guardianship has been delegated to the Department for Families and Communities by the Minister of Immigration. Case management responsibilities for these children and young people reside with the Department for Families and Communities.
- Family care meeting agreements:
 - an additional group consisting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, following a family care meeting held by the Courts Administration Authority.

Case for providing a priority response

There is strong evidence that children and young people removed from their family because of

abuse and neglect have much higher levels of need than other children. They are likely to have suffered serious developmental and cognitive delays or significant trauma associated with physical or sexual abuse or neglect. They may also experience serious dysfunctional family relationships or abandonment that give rise to psychological disturbances.

In one American study in Baltimore it was reported that of 2,419 children coming into foster care almost all (92%) had at least one abnormality on physical examination including disorders of the upper respiratory tract (66%), skin (61%), genitals (10%), eyes (8%), abdomen (8%), lungs (7%) and extremities (6%) (Chernoff et al. 1994). Nearly one-quarter (23%) of younger children failed a developmental screening and 22% of older children were already receiving special education services before placement. As a result of these evaluations, 53% of the children were referred for further medical services (Simms et al. 2000).

In a recent South Australia study that assessed the mental health and wellbeing of children and adolescents in home-based foster care, 6.7% of 13- to 17-year-olds reported a suicide attempt that required medical treatment. Caregivers reported that 53.4% of children needed professional help for their mental health problems but only 26.9% had obtained help during the previous six months (Sawyer et al. 2002). Other studies have documented rates of developmental delays in preschool aged children entering foster care ranging from 20% to 60% (Takayama & Coulter 1998) and children entering care are less likely to be fully immunised (Silver et al. 1999).

In 2005 the Department for Families and Communities released *Rapid Response* within the *Keeping Them Safe* reform framework². *Rapid Response* is a whole of Government response to address outcomes across all life domains: health, education, recreation, housing and wellbeing for children under guardianship by providing a priority service.

Rapid Response recognises that multiple barriers exist in providing good health care for these children as:

- they are likely to experience difficulty accessing health services often as a result of chaotic lifestyles

² www.familiesandcommunities.sa.gov.au/Default.aspx?tabid=733

³ This figure was at December 2006 (Families SA Internal Database).

