

## Is your practice ready to deal with an emergency?

Management of emergencies is an integral part of life in general practice. GPs and practice nurses may encounter a wide variety of emergencies in the course of their daily work given that they can be the first point of contact for patients.

Managing life-threatening conditions such as myocardial infarction, acute exacerbation of asthma, anaphylactic shock, head injuries, convulsions, and trauma can be part and parcel of GP life.

Individual clinicians may go months or even years without having to manage an emergency. Consequently, many staff members do not receive regular training and updates in this area and perhaps may deem preparing for emergencies as a low priority. Rarity makes the task of keeping skills up to date a real challenge. Managing emergencies requires a unique skillset, knowledge, and proficiency in the use of medical equipment and medication. The equipment required will vary depending on the practice location e.g. remote rural or inner-city practice and the skills available to manage the emergency. Decisions on the equipment and drugs required to manage these situations will also be influenced by the:

- Medical conditions clinicians are likely to face
- Medicines and equipment that staff are trained and competent to use
- Availability of local ambulance cover
- Proximity to the local hospital and/or emergency department
- Availability and proximity of a local pharmacy

### Preparing for emergencies

Having robust practice policies and protocols that are regularly discussed and updated should help maintain the essential knowledge and outline the practice's approach to managing emergency situations. Regular attendance at practical courses, in-house team training, and mandatory training such as Basic Life Support (BLS) in line with professional obligations, will help sustain essential skills. A record of all updates and training for staff members should be recorded within the practice. The value of in-house team training should not be underestimated. It provides an opportunity for all staff to practice their roles and responsibilities in the management of emergencies. Team training also allows for staff members to familiarise themselves with emergency equipment such as defibrillators, oxygen regulators and the necessary connectors. It also may identify any training needs as well as enhancing collaboration and cohesiveness of the team function.

A key step in preparing for medical emergencies is ensuring appropriate up-to-date equipment and medicines are in place. Practice teams should discuss and agree on the necessary equipment and medicines that reflect the spectrum of anticipated emergencies at the practice. The following are some key risk management strategies that may assist the team in keeping your equipment safe and reduce the risk of harm to patients:-

1. Develop an inventory of all necessary emergency equipment;
2. Ensure equipment is securely stored in a convenient location and all staff are aware of its location;
3. Develop a rota for checking emergency equipment within the practice. Nominate a member of staff to undertake this responsibility including cover when they are on leave. Consider rotating staff to

- check the equipment with a member of the clinical team thus allowing all staff to familiarise themselves with the equipment;
4. Delegate responsibility to check equipment in individual doctors' bags including expiry dates on medicines and equipment;
  5. Record the checks in a logbook or electronically, including date and time, and sign each entry;
  6. Ensure a system is in place for service and calibration of equipment in line with manufacturer's instructions. Maintain a record of all maintenance checks;
  7. Develop a system for checking medication expiry dates and ensure effective stock rotation. Ensure all medication is securely stored and controlled drugs are managed in line with legislation;
  8. Ensure compliance with Health and Safety regulations transporting and storing equipment e.g. oxygen.

### **Good communication**

As with all aspects of patient care, effective communication with patients, their families, and team colleagues is essential when providing emergency care. As with any consultation, taking a detailed medical history and examination including information from family members, and any witnesses to the incident is key to managing emergency situations. Having good interpersonal and communication skills will allow for effective information exchange in a calm manner between the patient, colleagues, family members, and other paramedical staff that may be present.

In addition to effective communication, good leadership is essential to achieving successful and high-quality team interventions in an emergency. A member of the clinical team should take overall leadership in an emergency situation. Effective leadership should provide direction, instruct staff to carry out what is expected and ensure a collaborative and shared decision-making approach to managing the situation at hand.

In many GP settings, the non-clinical staff may be involved in an emergency such as the initial approach by a patient / family member, calling of an ambulance or communicating with family members. All communications between members of the healthcare team should be clear and unambiguous and incorporate a 'check back' strategy thereby acknowledging receipt of the communication.

Managing emergencies can be stressful for all involved. Such techniques may reduce the incidence of confusion avoid misinterpretation. Staff should also be aware that emergencies are worrying for both the patient and family members who may be in attendance. Prompt attention, explanation, and a calm manner may help alleviate their fears and have confidence in the care provided.

### **Debrief and significant event analysis**

Emergency situations no matter what the outcome can be stressful and traumatic for all involved. It is advisable following any emergency situation that the practice team have an opportunity to debrief. This facilitates discussion of individual and team level performance and identifies points of excellence as well as potential errors made. It also helps to structure plans to improve subsequent performance. Where an adverse event or near-miss occurs, a significant event analysis should be undertaken and any learning should be discussed and disseminated amongst the practice team. Risk management review / report documents could potentially be discoverable in the event of a claim.

### Use of a checklist

The use of a checklist may be beneficial when preparing for emergencies. Checklists protect against forgetfulness, minimize omissions of critical steps, making it easier to work in stressful pressured situations. The following is an example of a checklist for emergency preparedness, but should be adapted to each individual practice's needs:-

|     |  | Yes | No |
|-----|--|-----|----|
| 1.  | The practice has a detailed policy in place outlining the roles and responsibilities to manage emergencies                                       |     |    |
| 2.  | An inventory of all medical emergency practice equipment is in place   |     |    |
| 3.  | An inventory of all medical emergency equipment for individual doctors bags is in place  |     |    |
| 4.  | All staff are aware of the location of the emergency equipment within the practice   |     |    |
| 5.  | A rota is in place with designated responsibility for checking all emergency equipment both within the practice and for individual doctors' bags |     |    |
| 6.  | All checks are recorded in a logbook or electronically, including date and time, and a signature for each entry                                  |     |    |
| 7.  | The practice has a system in place to ensure service and calibration of equipment takes place in line with the manufacturers' instruction        |     |    |
| 8.  | A record of all maintenance checks are kept within the practice  |     |    |
| 9.  | Emergency medicines are checked for expiry dates and an effective system of stock rotation is in place   |     |    |
| 10. | All emergency drugs are stored within a locked container   |     |    |
| 11. | All controlled drugs are stored in line with legislation requirements  |     |    |
| 12. | Storage and transport of oxygen is in line with Health and Safety regulations  |     |    |
| 13. | Following all emergencies a team debrief takes place   |     |    |

This is a sample checklist. It is not intended to be either exhaustive or mandatory.

### Conclusion

Regular educational updates and practical team training can assist staff in maintaining the necessary skills and competence to manage emergencies within the practice. All staff in general practice should consider reviewing this aspect of their work to ensure they can deliver a high-quality emergency service. Managing emergencies can cause stress to all concerned, hence, it is advisable that the practice team have an opportunity to debrief, and review lessons learned.

*"This article was originally published in our Medzine on 30 June 2021. The contents of this publication are indicative of current developments and contain guidance on general medico legal queries. It does not constitute and should not be relied upon as definitive legal, clinical or other advice and if you have any specific queries, please contact MediseC for advice".*