Improving quality of hospital care for children

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Key Messages

- Millions of children present to poorly resourced health facilities each year with treatable serious illnesses
- Improving the quality of care for these children is essential to achieve MDG4
- A number of resources are currently available to improve quality of care
- Countries need to be supported in best adapting these resources
- Further operational research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of approaches to improve quality of care in the Region

Background

MDG4 targets for reducing child deaths cannot be met without improving the hospital care. Gains made at the primary health level will be lost by the referral institutions without urgent input.

Since the 1990s, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF have promoted the Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI) at the primary health care level. This has aimed to train health workers in the management of childhood diseases that cause the majority of deaths each year. Of all children assessed using IMCI guidelines, approximately 1 in 5 will need referral to a hospital. These children needing referral are seriously ill and at high risk of dying, and need to be managed appropriately. Therefore, ensuring good quality of care in health facilities for these children is important for achieving the fourth Millennium Development Goal (MDG4) of reducing child deaths.

A sick child presenting to a health facility needs to be assessed quickly, receive emergency interventions, followed by ongoing treatment, supportive care, monitoring, preventative care and follow up. Unfortunately, studies of the quality of care given to children in developing countries have highlighted deficiencies in all these areas. In particular, there is often:

- Lack of paediatric clinical guidelines
- Inadequate health worker training
- Lack of Triage and Emergency treatment systems
- Poor staffing levels
- Little monitoring and inadequate supportive care (e.g. fluids and oxygen)
- Lack of essential equipment and medication

Approaches for improving quality of care

In 2005 the WHO produced the “Pocket Book of Hospital Care for Children” in an effort to provide a global resource for addressing the quality of care in
poorly-resourced hospitals. The Pocket Book cuts across a number of priority areas:

- Provides evidence-based standard guidelines for treating children
- Can be used as a basis for health worker training
- With many aspects of hospitals needing improvement, the Pocket Book provides a focal point around which action can be based
- Stresses that caring for children is more than administering medications, and highlights the importance of supportive care, monitoring and counselling, in a setting of family friendly care.

Two examples in the Asia-Pacific region where the Pocket Book has been adopted as Standard Treatment Guidelines for children are the Solomon Islands and Laos. The Pocket Book is also being used in this way in over 30 countries and has been translated into more than 12 languages.

The Pocket Book is being updated by WHO, incorporating the latest evidence. A global collaborative effort between ministries of health, donor partners, paediatric professional associations and academic institutions is needed to ensure that it is widely used.

Concurrently, pre-service and post-graduate training for doctors and nurses needs to be strengthened. A stronger focus is needed on how to achieve quality care and a stronger understanding of evidence-based medicine. The availability and use of essential medicines such as oxygen needs to be improved (see Oxygen: an essential medicine).

Recommendations

The Pocket Book provides a basis for holistic and practical interventions to improve the quality of care in hospitals. Many countries in the Pacific and Asia are committed to using the Pocket Book, but need to be supported to do this.

Implementation requires:

- Adaptation +/- translation
- Training
- Development of standards
- Assessment of quality of care
- Improved availability of essential medicines
- Appropriate technology, including to supply oxygen
- Incorporation of the Pocket Book in undergraduate and post-graduate health worker training
- Monitoring and audit to assess progress and identify priorities for improving care.

For further information and resources see: www.wchknowledgehub.com.au

References


Further reading

WHO Pocket Book of Hospital Care for Children www.icrhc.org


EXAMPLE: QUALITY OF CARE APPROACHES IN LAOS

The Pocket Book is the first Lao language guideline for the care of sick children. Lao paediatricians throughout the country are now providing in-service training in provincial and district hospitals, and introducing the Pocket Book in undergraduate and post-graduate medical training. Combined with hospital assessments and training, the Pocket Book has provided Lao paediatricians with a clear focus for action to improve hospital care. Laos has developed a 3 year paediatric residency program to equip doctors from around the country to lead child health in each province.

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