

Improving emergency mental health triage

By Marc Broadbent

Emergency mental health triage is a process that happens in the Emergency Department (ED) and occurs within the context of normal triage practice. The term uniquely describes the assessment, allocation of a triage scale and referral of clients with mental illness or a related condition to a mental health triage clinician. In December 2000 the Barwon Health Mental Health Service sought to improve the assessment and management of clients with mental illness presenting to the ED by introducing a mental health triage scale and associated mental health education. This six month project improved the competence and confidence of ED triage nurses in triaging and managing this client group (Broadbent et al 2002). A review of the literature in 2004 demonstrated that the introduction of mental health triage scales into the ED with associated education improved confidence in the ED triage staff and improved outcomes for clients with mental illness in the ED (Broadbent et al 2004).

In 2004 the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) commissioned the National Institute of Clinical Studies (NICS) to improve ED triage process for people presenting with mental health problems and to improve the collaboration between ED's and mental health services (Potter et al 2006). The project was partly based on improvements to the process of mental health triage at Barwon Health. The NICS project involved the introduction of a mental health triage scale into 19 ED's across Victoria.

While this initiative improved the ED processes for clients with mental illness the project evaluation suggests there are outstanding issues to be

resolved (NICS 2006). A review of the literature suggests there is agreement that: mental health triage scales improve client outcomes and confidence in ED triage staff (Broadbent et al 2004); mental health triage nursing is an emerging speciality within the field of mental health nursing (Sands 2004); and that the presence of mental health liaison staff in ED's is both welcomed by ED staff and improves client care (Wand 2005).

Despite these findings there is a distinct lack of evidence in the literature suggesting widespread uptake of mental health triage scales in ED's across Australia and anecdotal evi-

dence suggests that ED and mental health services still experience difficulties in coordinating care for clients with mental illness. This area of nursing practice is the research focus of a PhD currently being undertaken by the author through Central Queensland University.

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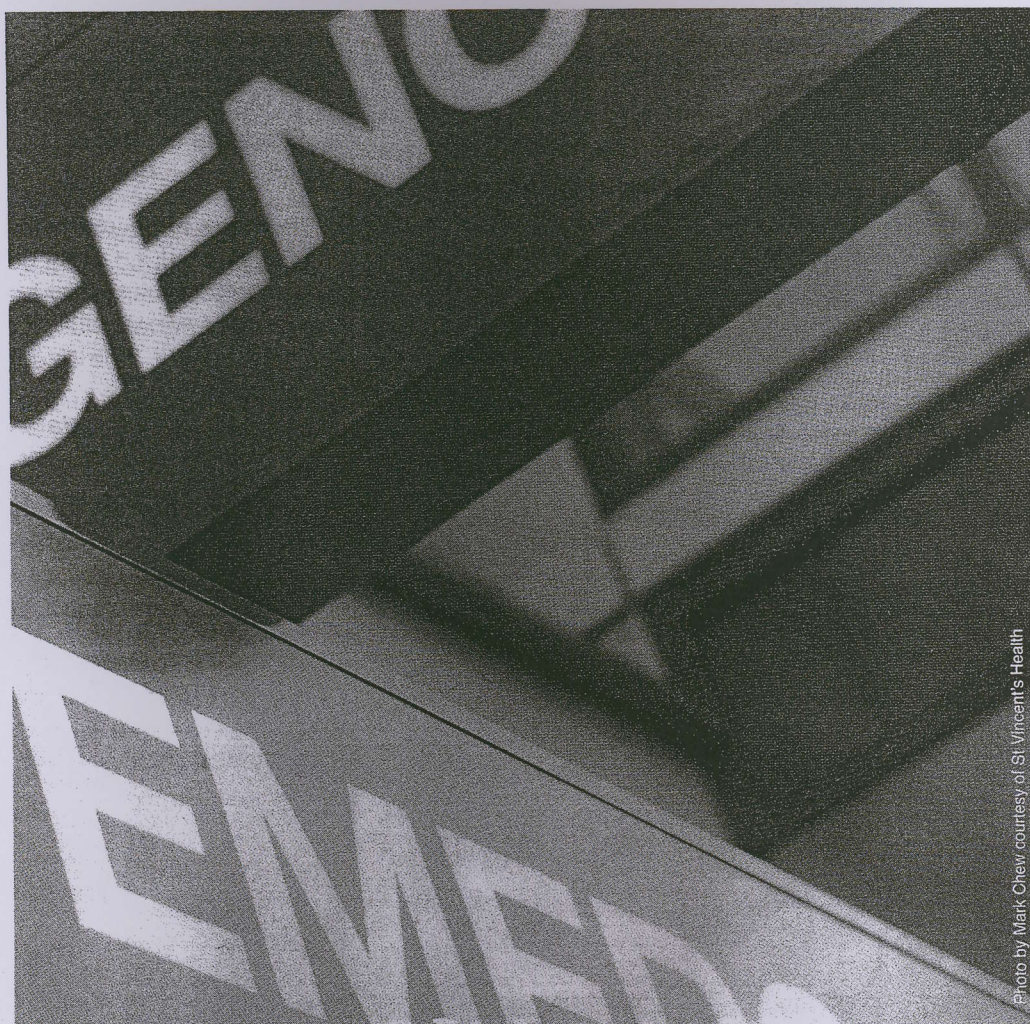


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