Media Release

October 28, 2008

Patients must not go it alone in hospital: expert

Patients going into hospital should be vigilant in ensuring their own safety, an academic will tell the National Forum on Safety and Quality in Health Care in Adelaide when it opens tomorrow (29 October).

Director of the Institute of Health Innovation at the University of New South Wales Professor Jeffrey Braithwaite says 10 per cent of people admitted to hospital end up being harmed during their stay.

Professor Braithwaite says patients must realise it’s partly their responsibility to advocate for themselves and monitor their situation while in hospital.

“Patients should not just assume they’ll go into hospital and that everything that happens to them will be beautifully executed,” says Professor Braithwaite, who is also director of the Centre for Clinical Governance Research at UNSW's Faculty of Medicine.

“Some people go into the system with a predisposing illness, which is hard to treat. Others will have more than one condition to be dealt with. While they are in hospital they may sustain an injury, get an infectious disease or perhaps have an adverse reaction to medication. It’s complicated, and hard at that time to be both a patient and your own advocate.

“I’m not saying people shouldn’t trust the health system – many people receive excellent care – but be vigilant, don’t go it alone.

“You need relatives, friends or colleagues to speak up for you and monitor your progress.”

Professor Braithwaite says if people have the skills and opportunity, they should find out about their own conditions by looking things up. There’s lots of information on the internet. For those with a chronic illness, he recommends joining a support group.

“You can get a lot of information just by emailing groups such as the post-polio network, and meet a lot of knowledgeable, supportive people with the same condition,” he says.

Professor Braithwaite says many adverse events in hospitals are caused by communication errors but he predicts technology will help to improve this situation.

He says eventually patients will have individual, private websites containing their health information.

“You will be able to put all sorts of things on your website and get all your test results, x-rays, every encounter you have with your GP uploaded onto it,” he says.

“This is all very confidential information but at the moment there are dozens and dozens of systems that don’t connect, which contain this information.
“Just among GPs, there are many different systems and then there is the issue of trying to share information across states where laws don’t even link up, let alone getting data to talk to each other.”

Professor Braithwaite says the problem of privacy will be solved if patients get to keep their own records.

“That’s going to revolutionise everything but most revolutions start slowly.”

Professor Braithwaite is presenting a keynote address to the National Forum on Safety and Quality in Health Care on “Patient safety: grounds for optimism or pessimism? Try realism” on Thursday, 30 October, 2008.

The forum is hosted by the Australian Council on Healthcare Standards (ACHS), in partnership with the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care and the South Australian Government’s Department of Health. The Forum is also being held in conjunction with the Royal Australasian College of Medical Administrators (RACMA) Annual Scientific Meeting and AGM.


**Media information:** Colleen Clur, Niche Consultants on 0418 253 340 or ACHS Communications Manager, Rachel Gleeson on 0417 003 775