



Raise the Flag: Sepsis quality improvement initiative

Engagement with consumers and whānau were at the centre of a project aimed to improve early recognition and treatment of sepsis in New Zealand hospitals.

Sepsis is one of the leading causes of hospital deaths worldwide,¹ with Māori and Pacific peoples experiencing disproportionately higher rates.² When identified early, sepsis can be effectively treated with timely administration of antibiotics, intravenous fluids, and other supportive measures, thereby preventing severe illness, organ failure, and death.

About the project

The project aimed to improve early recognition and timely treatment of sepsis patients in New Zealand hospitals by developing a sepsis quality improvement package that will provide a standardised approach across New Zealand to treat sepsis.

The project was led by the Health Quality & Safety Commission Te Tāhū Hauora in collaboration with Sepsis Trust NZ and representatives from professional groups, and regulatory bodies. A sepsis clinical advisory group worked alongside consumers and whānau to co-design a national sepsis quality improvement package.

The national sepsis package provides hospitals with standardised, evidence-based resources, including pathway tools, clinical and measurement guides, learning material and consumer resources to support clinicians and empower whānau, ensuring a consistent, equitable, and effective approach to sepsis care across the motu.

Engaging with consumers and whānau

The project placed consumers and whānau at the center of developing the interventions and designing the sepsis package. Our consumer member with lived experience of sepsis was a critical member of the working group. They attended relevant meetings and were consulted during the development of resources.

By involving a consumer with lived experience, resources were developed in ways that reflect patient realities and ensure equitable access. This demonstrated the Code's expectation that engagement actively shapes service improvement.

¹ Fleischmann C, Scherag A, Adhikari NKJ, et al. 2016. Assessment of global incidence and mortality of hospital-treated sepsis: current estimates and limitations. *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine* 193(3): 259–72. DOI: 10.1164/ rccm.201504-0781OC.

² Huggan PJ, Bell A, Waetford J, et al. 2017. Evidence of high mortality and increasing burden of sepsis in a regional sample of the New Zealand Population. *Open Forum Infectious Diseases*. 4(3):ofx106. DOI: 10.1093/ofid/ofx106. eCollection 2017 Summer.

Our consumer and Māori advisor helped ensure the tools were culturally grounded, accessible, and relevant to Māori communities. Through hui, co-design workshops, and one-on-one kōrero, the team created resources that reflect real experiences and support safer, more equitable care for those affected by sepsis.

Their insights were key in developing these resources and guides and aligns to the Code of expectations.

What consumers and whānau said and lessons learned

Consumers shared that sepsis was often not clearly explained, and the word 'sepsis' was rarely used. They wanted better communication, earlier recognition, and culturally appropriate resources. Many felt unheard when raising concerns. Their stories highlighted the need for plain language, staff education, and whānau-friendly tools to support understanding and care.

The project team learned that technical meetings could overwhelm consumer and whānau involvement. Discussions were tailored so involvement was tailored to relevant discussions with consumers.

Adapting processes through the project's Māori advisor's lived experience helped refocus the team on consumer and whānau needs. These lessons strengthened the Code of Expectations through cultural safety, inclusion, and meaningful engagement throughout the project.

What the project team achieved

The project led to refined sepsis tools for hospitals and whānau, helping staff recognise and treat sepsis earlier. Governance groups can now provide clear accountability and request standardised data related to sepsis using guidance published in the national sepsis package. For patients, this means faster care and better outcomes. The national package supports equity, with consistent resources and a shared definition to guide future improvements.

Next steps

The sepsis package of tools and resources is being used across hospitals. The Commission's Quality Systems team will collect feedback and update the resources as needed. Consumer and whānau voices will remain central, and we'll continue ensuring the resources remain appropriate and meet consumer needs. This may include developing whānau resources in Te Reo Māori and Pasifika languages. A measurement guide supports hospital teams to track progress and report on sepsis care improvements locally.

Resources

- [Code of expectations for health entities' engagement with consumers and whānau – www.hqsc.govt.nz](http://www.hqsc.govt.nz)
- [Code of expectations implementation guide – www.hqsc.govt.nz](http://www.hqsc.govt.nz)
- [Consumer and Whānau Engagement SURE framework – www.hqsc.govt.nz](http://www.hqsc.govt.nz)

- National Raise the Flag sepsis package:
 - Resources for patients and whānau – www.hqsc.govt.nz
 - Patient stories about sepsis – www.hqsc.govt.nz
 - Raise the Flag: sepsis quality improvement package – www.hqsc.govt.nz

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