

Victorian Network of Smokefree Healthcare Services

Ph: (03) 9429 6728

Email: smokefreevictoria@projecthealth.com.au

Web: www.smokefreevictoria.com.au

Coroners Court of Victoria
65 Kavanagh St,
Southbank
Victoria 3006

22nd December 2020

Dear Sir/Madam,

Response to recommendations from the Victorian Coroner in relation to the death of [REDACTED] [REDACTED] (Ms T)

The Victorian Coroner approached the Victorian Network of Smokefree Healthcare Services (VNSHS) in May 2020 to respond to recommendations made in relation to the death of Ms T, who had a history mental illness and alcohol dependence, and whose death by hanging occurred a day after she self-discharged from the Box Hill Hospital.

In her report¹, the Coroner found that Eastern Health missed opportunities during Ms Ts voluntary admission to prevent her from self-discharging prior to comprehensive mental health assessment. Namely, she was not offered nicotine replacement therapy, and a treatment plan to encourage her not to leave the emergency department was not understood by all emergency department staff. The Coroner also found that Eastern Health missed opportunities to offer further follow up to Ms T after she self-discharged.

In light of these findings, the Coroner made three recommendations, including to specifically address the management of nicotine withdrawal in the Emergency Department:

1. *In the interests of promoting public health and safety and preventing like deaths, I **recommend** that Eastern Health review the communication processes both within the emergency department and between emergency department staff and mental health staff to improve the accessibility and reliability of clinical information used by clinicians to make decisions about patients leaving the emergency department while waiting for a mental health assessment.*
2. *In the interests of promoting public health and safety and preventing like deaths, I **recommend** that the Victorian Network of Smokefree Healthcare Services and Eastern Health develop and promote a guideline specific to the assessment, prevention and management of withdrawal symptoms from nicotine in patients while in an emergency department.*

¹ Coroners Court of Victoria. Finding into death without inquest COR 2016 0427
https://www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/MsT_042716.pdf

3. *In the interests of promoting public health and safety and preventing like deaths, I **recommend** that Eastern Health review the systems for follow up of patients who leave the emergency department while waiting for a comprehensive mental health assessment, to ensure that they are in line with recommendations from the Department of Health and Human Services and the Chief Psychiatrist.*

The second recommendation is the subject of this response.

Response process

Following receipt of the Coroner's request:

- VNSHS representatives and Eastern Health corresponded and met to determine an agreed approach.
- A background document was developed outlining this approach, which involved formation of a working group of relevant stakeholders (Attachment 1).
- Participation in the working group was invited from the VNSHS membership and direct invitations were also made to key stakeholders, notably Quit Victoria and the Tobacco Control Unit of DHHS Victoria.
- The working group (Table 1) met on five occasions (27 August, 1 October, 27 September, 29 October, 12 November).

| Health Service / Organisation | Representative |
|---|--|
| Victorian Network of Smokefree Healthcare Services – Coordinating Centre, Barwon Health | Dr Rudi Gasser, Regional Coordinator Fiona Landgren, Manager Regional Coordinating Centre |
| Quit Victoria | Dr Sarah White, Director |
| Tobacco Control Unit, DHHS | Melissa Boag, Manager Tobacco Control Adam Casey, Senior Policy Advisor |
| Eastern Health | Dr Matthew Frei, Addiction specialist Dr Hussein Alabodi, Emergency physician |
| Alfred Health | Emma Dean, Pharmacist and Population Health Lead |
| Barwon Health | Dr Belinda Carne, Emergency Physician Dr Hayden Richards, Emergency Physician |
| Bendigo Health | Stephen Barrett, Project Officer - Health Promotion Daniel Eltringham, Drug & Alcohol Care Coordinator (ED) |
| Northern Health | Dr Joe Rotella, Toxicologist, ED Physician |

- The working group agreed the following:
 - the document would be best positioned as a guidance document rather than a clinical guideline as health services and emergency care settings have varying needs;
 - the target audience would be healthcare services who would use the document to inform their approach in emergency care in the context of established organisation-wide smokefree policies and clinical guidelines;
 - there are a number of key principles for managing nicotine dependence and withdrawal in emergency care settings;

- there are clinical steps and implementation approaches that reflect these principles and can be implemented in all emergency care settings.
- The agreed guidance document is found in Attachment 2.
- The working group also discussed approaches to promotion and implementation as summarised below.

Guidance document promotion and implementation

In Victoria, smoking is a high priority health issue as reflected in current health system plans.^{2 3 4} These plans have in common the strategy to embed smoking cessation support into routine clinical care. There are therefore numerous opportunities to promote the guidance material that has been developed and to integrate implementation with other initiatives. This will be a focus on ongoing efforts of VNSHS and other stakeholders in the coming months.

Specifically, efforts will be directed at wider stakeholder engagement to achieve awareness of this issue, support for promulgating the information and, where appropriate, endorsement of the guidance document. This will include:

- Identifying all stakeholders that may be engaged to promote and implement the guidance material.
- Seeking endorsement from key stakeholders in emergency care including the Australasian College of Emergency Medicine and Directors of Emergency Departments.
- Promoting awareness among Victorian healthcare service CEOs, including via VNSHS members and the DHHS.
- Promoting awareness among Directors of Pharmacy, particularly with respect to issues around NRT formulation availability in emergency care settings.
- Promoting the need for education around the management of nicotine dependence in emergency care settings.
- in Victoria through their regular meeting.

The group is conscious of the changing circumstances in relation to smoking and particularly around the use of e-cigarettes. They will therefore look for opportunities to keep health services informed about these issues, including the roles of DHHS, Quit and VNSHS.

We thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important area of work.

Regards



Fiona Landgren

Manager, Coordinating Centre, Victorian Network of Smokefree Healthcare Services

² Department of Health and Human Services Victoria 2019. Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2019-2023. Available from: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/policiesandguidelines/victorian-public-health-wellbeing-plan-2019-2023>

³ Department of Health and Human Services Victoria 2020. Victorian cancer plan 2020-2024. Available from: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/health-strategies/cancer-care/victorian-cancer-plan>

⁴ VicHealth 2019. VicHealth Action Agenda for Health Promotion 2019-23. <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/vichealth-action-agenda>