

7. An interdisciplinary approach to caring

Best care for older people in hospital

What is it?

An **interdisciplinary** approach involves team members from different disciplines working collaboratively, with a common purpose, to set goals, make decisions and share resources and responsibilities.¹

A team of clinicians from different disciplines, together with the patient, undertakes assessment, diagnosis, intervention, goal-setting and the creation of a care plan. The patient, their family and carers are involved in any discussions about their condition, prognosis and care plan.²

In contrast, a **multidisciplinary** approach involves team members working independently to create discipline-specific care plans that are implemented simultaneously, but without explicit regard to their interaction.³

Depending on the resources of the individual health service, a combination of the two approaches may be used when caring for older people.

This factsheet will outline the features of an interdisciplinary approach to caring for older people.

Why is it important?

- Older people in hospitals often have a number of different diagnoses and consequently have multiple and complex needs. Compared to younger age groups, a greater proportion of older people require an interdisciplinary approach to their care in order to deal with complex multimorbidity, social and psychological issues.³
- The best possible outcomes for older people are achieved through a consultative, collaborative approach to care that actively involves the patient, their family/carers and an interdisciplinary team.¹

- An interdisciplinary approach can help avoid risk averse thinking by weighing up the risk against benefits for the patient.
- An interdisciplinary approach can improve patient outcomes, healthcare processes and levels of satisfaction.^{4,5} It can also reduce length of stay^{6,7} and avoid duplication of assessments, leading to more comprehensive and holistic records of care.⁸
- The opportunity for discussion created by interdisciplinary care planning can be used for the patient, their family and carers to develop their ongoing plan.³

How can you adopt an interdisciplinary approach to caring for older people?

The care team need to work together, utilising an interdisciplinary approach, to provide and implement a care plan that meets the patient's goals and needs.

All health care professionals have a shared role in providing person-centred care for older people.

Elements integral to a successful interdisciplinary approach

Leadership

Positive leadership and management give clear direction and vision for the team through:

- Promoting an atmosphere of trust where contributions are valued and consensus is fostered.
- Ensuring that the necessary resources, infrastructure and training are available, as well as a mix of skills, competencies and personalities amongst team members.⁹

Person-centred practice

Well-integrated and coordinated care that is based on the needs of the patient can contribute to reducing delays to provision of care and duplicating assessment.¹

- Involving the patient in all aspects of their care empowers them to speak up and contribute to decision-making.
- Formulating shared standardised interdisciplinary care plans and records of care to contribute to holistic and comprehensive person-centred care.

Teamwork

An interdisciplinary approach relies on health professionals from different disciplines, along with the patient, working collaboratively as a team. The most effective teams share responsibilities and promote role interdependence while respecting individual members' experience and autonomy.⁹

- Ensure team members have clear goals, and an understanding of their shared roles and responsibilities within the team structure.⁵
- Participate in joint assessment, diagnosis and goal setting.
- Recognise the overlap in knowledge and expertise of staff from different disciplines.⁸
- Encourage team cohesiveness and creativity through team commitment and the identification of mutual goals.⁵
- Encourage less experienced team members to ask questions which may give rise to creative ideas and alternative perspectives.⁵
- Establish teams with members from diverse disciplines to foster higher overall effectiveness, and hold regular team meetings which are associated with higher levels of innovation.¹⁰

Communication

Communication across disciplines, care providers and with the patient and their family/carers, is essential to setting the goals that most accurately reflect the person's desires and needs.

- Involve the patient's GP or pharmacist to increase the success of the intervention.¹¹
- Communicate openly to encourage genuine collaboration. A breakdown of communications between health professionals is a common factor in hospital errors and adverse events.^{4,12}
- Document assessments and ensure clinical handover documents are completed thoroughly and stored in a central place.

Want to know more?

Older people in hospital

www.health.vic.gov.au/older-people-in-hospital

National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards, 2011, Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care. <http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/our-work/>

A guide for assessing older people in hospital, 2004, Australian Health Minister's Advisory Council. [http://docs.health.vic.gov.au/docs/doc/611584DDA451964DCA25785200107D95/\\$FILE/assessing-older-people.pdf](http://docs.health.vic.gov.au/docs/doc/611584DDA451964DCA25785200107D95/$FILE/assessing-older-people.pdf)

Improving care for older people: a policy for Health Services, 2003, Department of Human Services, Victoria.

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/older/policy.htm>

See Factsheet 11. *References* for references cited in this factsheet.

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How to encourage an interdisciplinary approach to caring for older people in hospital

Designate a leader who can provide clear direction and vision for the team, while also listening and providing support to team members.



As a team, agree on values that will direct the service provision and approach.



Foster an atmosphere of trust where everyone's contributions are respected and valued, and consensus is encouraged.



Review current processes – such as assessments and referral methods, information communication and documentation – to ensure they facilitate an interdisciplinary approach.



Focus on the patient and be responsive to their needs and desires. Encourage and use patient, family, carer and care provider feedback to improve the quality of care.



Use strategies that promote communication within and between teams to encourage collaborative decision-making and effective team processes.



Ensure there is sufficient and appropriate team staffing that provides a mix of skills, competencies, personalities, knowledge and experience.



In recruitment, look for staff whose skills include teamwork and collaborative leadership.



Promote role interdependence (mutual support and reciprocity) while respecting individual roles and autonomy.



Facilitate personal development through training, rewards, recognition and opportunities for career development.