

Fragile population needs ICU safety boost

‘Patient Safety in the ICU: The Vienna Declaration’ will be signed in the Austrian capital on Sunday, 11 October, just ahead of the 22nd annual congress of the European Society of Intensive Care Medicine (ESICM).

Bringing together intensive care unit (ICU) specialists, industry and patients groups, the Declaration aims to improve mortality rates in ICUs across Europe and beyond.

Patient safety has always been a huge issue, so why has the 5,000-strong ESICM chosen this year to launch its initiative?

Population changes

According to the society’s president, Rui Moreno: “Our population is getting bigger, getting older, becoming sicker and suffering more chronic diseases. In general, we are becoming more fragile.

“This means that more patients are passing through ICUs. And when you get more patients - sicker patients - your safety margins will obviously decrease.

“Political initiatives, especially during the recent Czech Republic presidency of the EU, have put a lot of emphasis on infections. As a direct result, there now appears to be a political commitment in Europe to decrease infections, which is obviously one patient safety issue.

“So, the members of ESICM think the time is now right to shift these and similar discussions from small, backroom meetings to the front line. It’s not just the medical profession, but industry too. And the patient groups clearly have to be involved in this effort. All of society has to be committed.”

Time to target quality

President-elect Andrew Rhodes comes at it from a more political angle: “Over the last five-to-ten years the political focus has been on performance targets. But, for the patient, what’s more important it is quality. Patient safety and quality are inter-linked. Clearly, the best way to look after our patients is to make sure we don’t do anything wrong to start with!

“Funding has shifted in Europe. It now pays hospitals to push the maximum number of patients through the same number of beds. They get more money but, of course, it means that units are busier, patients are closer together, there’s less time to look after them and infections might get worse.

“There are direct impacts on safety and quality, so we have to step back and see what’s right for the patient, not the politicians and the funders and the economists.”

Achieving the Declaration’s goals

So how will the Declaration help? Some of the answers are surprisingly simple. Rhodes continues: “Across Europe systems are different and resources are different. There are rich and poor countries. But a lot of the safety changes we can make would be relatively cheap and easy. So we’re not talking, for example, about implementing an expensive drug, but about something as simple, say, as washing hands before setting up.”

Charles Sprung is ESICM treasurer and takes up Rhodes’s theme: “For instance, if a patient has a heart attack he should be taking aspirin afterwards. But how many doctors actually prescribe aspirin? Not many.

“For this reason we would benefit from simple checklists. Statistically, it’s a lot safer to travel in an airplane than a car. Pilots go through checklists. As doctors, we have guidelines but do physicians follow them? Unfortunately many of them don’t, so we need to educate them and try to change their behavior. This is extremely difficult.

“There are many studies on [the benefits of] hand washing but the most difficult people to get to wash their hands are actually physicians. It’s the same when trying to get doctors to ‘gown up’. There’s a whole psychology that needs to be changed.”

Raising awareness

Adds Moreno: “Much of the solution comes down to awareness among physicians. To be aware that there is a problem is half-way to solving it. OK, the problem is everywhere but the roots of the problem are sometimes different in a different location. So this global problem must have local solutions. One-size doesn’t fit all but getting together is a very positive step.”

Rhodes says: “We will have 40 or 50 national societies signing the Declaration at the congress because they all recognise that patient safety is a problem. They all realise that they have a problem in their own back yards.

“Show us the money!”

As for the issue of funding, the president-elect talks of both ends of the fiscal scale:

“Obviously” says Rhodes, “to get 40-50 societies together costs money. We need funds. But we also need funds for large research projects plus money for research. That’s big bucks and can only come from institutions the size of, for example, the European Commission.



Moreno agrees and makes two final points: “If we are not funded by the likes of the Commission, we will have to go to industry for the money - and that obviously brings with it potential conflicts of interest.

“But, meanwhile, realistically,” he adds, “we cannot sit back and wait for Brussels to solve all of our problems. Within our own profession we need to join forces. Coordination and cooperation are the keys to success. That’s the thrust of our Declaration.”

ENDS

Note to editors:

More information on the ESICM is available at www.esicm.org. For fact sheets and backgrounders visit <http://patientsafety.esicm.org/press.asp>

To arrange interviews or obtain further features and latest updates on the Declaration of Vienna, please contact our media partner Tony Mallett, on 0032 472 280 878. Email tony.mallett@gmail.com