

What are you calling URGENT

Variability in terminology used by clinicians negotiating the timeliness of transfers

A critical incident involving our department highlighted the importance of precision of terminology during transfer discussions. The word "urgent" was used by a receiving centre to indicate the required timeliness of the transfer. The referring centre interpreted "urgent" to mean, "send the patient now", but for the receiving centre, "urgent" meant "send the patient within the next 24 hours".

Aim:

To explore and quantify the variability in clinicians' terminology used during transfer discussions.

Method:

- ED senior nurses, and doctors from throughout the hospital, were asked what terms they use when booking an ambulance through ambulance control. This was done via a questionnaire with an aid of a basic scenario to help with context.
- A total of 69 questionnaires were returned.

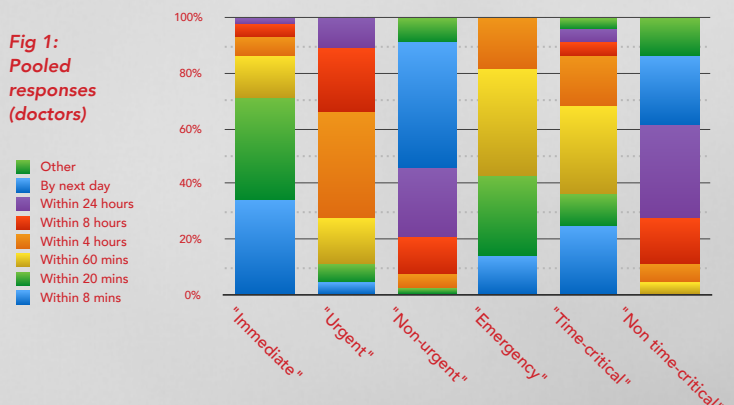
Results:

72% of nurses, 25% of consultants & 16% of other doctors would expect a response time within one hour for an "urgent" ambulance, whereas 12% of nurses, 39% of consultants & 38% of other doctors felt that "urgent" meant within four hours.

For an "immediate" ambulance transfer, 78% of nurses, 50% of consultants & 34% of other doctors would expect an "immediate" ambulance within 8 mins, with only 6% of nurses, 25% of consultants, & 36% of other doctors correctly expecting a 30-minute response time for an "immediate" transfer ambulance (as per all-Wales policy).

Pooled physician responses are summarised in Fig 1 (above right).

Fig 1:
Pooled
responses
(doctors)



Conclusion/discussion:

- Safe and timely inter-hospital transfers require precise terminology during discussions about the acuity of the transfer, but it is clear there is significant potential for confusion.
- Sending and receiving units should agree a numerical timescale, e.g. "I want you to get the patient to me within the next 6 hours".
- Clinicians booking ambulances for inter-hospital transfers should be aware of the official descriptors of transfer acuity used by their ambulance service colleagues, and the target response times applicable to them.