

Suicide Risk Assessment: A Resource Guide for Canadian Health Care Organizations

Backgrounder

On September 23, 2011, the Canadian Patient Safety Institute (CPSI) and the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) released the *Suicide Risk Assessment: A Resource Guide for Canadian Health Care Organizations*.

This guide is primarily designed for use by Canadian health care organizations; however, it may be applicable in a wider variety of settings (e.g., school, work) and by a variety of people (e.g., individuals at risk, family members, friends, employers, and teachers).

The CPSI and the OHA developed this guide to help with educational programs focused on patient safety in mental health as well as quality improvement initiatives in health care organizations, locally and internationally.

Context:

- In the mental health context, there are unique patient safety issues such as self-harming behaviour and suicide that are different from other health settings.
- Suicide is an internationally recognized patient safety issue in health care.
- Previous research conducted by CPSI and the OHA identified suicide risk as a key issue in patient safety requiring a standardized approach to risk assessment and the identification of assessment tools.

The resource guide is divided into four main sections.

- The **first section** presents an overview of suicide risk assessment principles, processes, and considerations to help guide risk assessment in a variety of health settings.
- The **second section** consists of an inventory of suicide risk assessment tools that includes information on their psychometric properties and recommendations for their use.
- The **third section** provides a framework for suicide risk assessment, including application of risk assessment tools and recommendations for monitoring the quality of the risk assessment process.
- The **fourth section** provides resources for hospitals including key concepts, tips and diagrams which may be reproduced and posted in the organization. Additionally, it contains more detail on the project methodology as well as references to cited works.

Highlights:

- This guide was developed to support health care practitioners and decision-makers by summarizing key principles required to carry out a high-quality risk assessment.
- This guide is aligned with Accreditation Canada’s “Required Organization Practice” (ROP) on suicide prevention that requires a regular assessment of suicide risk for all persons in mental health service settings. It can assist organizations as they work to meet Accreditation Canada’s ROP around suicide risk assessment.
- The first resource of its kind, the guide is designed to assist Canadian health care organizations with standardizing the process of suicide risk assessment by presenting a framework for suicide risk assessment and identifying suicide risk assessment tools.
- The guide can help educate and inform health care providers and decision-makers by summarizing key aspects needed to carry out a high-quality risk assessment, which include the principles of suicide risk assessment and special considerations for certain populations and care settings.
- Key components of suicide risk assessment as documented in the guide:
 - Early screening within primary care settings has the potential to identify, reduce and prevent the risk of suicide.
 - Suicide risk assessment is a multifaceted process for learning about a person, recognizing and addressing his or her needs and stressors, and working with him or her to mobilize strengths and supports. The guide emphasizes that while suicide risk assessment tools are a part of this process, these should be used to support the assessment process, rather than to guide it.
 - It is important to understand that suicide risk assessment is part of the therapeutic process, and part of a person’s journey to recovery.
 - Care providers need to be appropriately trained to carry out effective assessments. Risk assessment tools can only assist in the process.
 - While suicide risk assessment instruments and scales are available and important elements of the process, they should never be used alone or as a substitute for a

thorough clinical assessment. Risk assessment tools are useful in providing additional information to inform the risk assessment interview.

- The establishment of a good therapeutic relationship with the person is vital and can improve the suicide risk assessment process.
 - Effective communication and collaboration are crucial for ensuring that suicide risk assessment remains thorough, consistent and effective in addressing a person's risk throughout his or her journey through the system.
 - Documentation is a key process for ensuring the efficacy of suicide risk assessment.
- Because the scope of suicide risk is extremely broad, this guide focused only on the process of risk assessment within the context of health care organizations. It does not focus on risk assessment in non-health care contexts, the feasibility of integrating technology into the risk assessment process (e.g., telepsychiatry and telemedicine), interventions for mitigating risk in different care environments, or prevention strategies.