

Blog: The Secret to Safer Care? Better Assessment, Not More Policies

If there's one thing every emergency department (ED) has in abundance, it's policy. Safeguarding protocols, triage checklists, escalation flowcharts, governance frameworks... and yet, despite the paperwork, mistakes still happen. Patients deteriorate unnoticed, staff feel overwhelmed, and decision-making can be inconsistent.



So, what's missing?

In a word: assessment. Not more of it. Better. Clearer. Smarter. Because safe care doesn't start with another file on a shelf—it starts with the ability of a nurse to spot the subtle signs of deterioration in a busy waiting room, to confidently escalate a concern, and to back that judgement with evidence.

And here's the truth of it: no policy can replace that level of clinical thinking. But well-designed assessment tools can build it.

That's why, at the Faculty of Emergency Nursing (FEN), we've stopped asking how we can get nurses to comply with policies—and started asking how we can empower them to assess with confidence and consistency. Because safe care flows from competence, not paperwork.

FEN's Quality Assured Assessment Proformas—Mini-CEX, DOPS, and ESLE—have been developed by emergency nurses, for emergency nurses. They aren't generic checklists. They're tailored to the emergency context and designed to assess what really matters:

- Can the nurse spot when something isn't right?
- Can they communicate their concern clearly and escalate appropriately?
- Can they justify clinical decisions based on real-time cues and structured tools?

That's what better assessment looks like—and it's measurable, observable, and replicable.

Why is this important now?

Because EDs are under pressure like never before. There's no margin for vague decisions or lost learning opportunities. New nurses are coming in fast. Experienced ones are burning out. And in the middle of it all, leaders are expected to maintain safety and quality.

But here's the good news: when we improve assessment, everything else gets easier.

- ✓ Safer decisions
- ✓ More consistent care
- ✓ Better handovers
- ✓ Stronger team communication
- ✓ Reduced incidents and complaints

When nurses know exactly what good practice looks like—and when they're trained and supported to recognise and deliver it—care improves without needing to add another layer of bureaucracy.

And the confidence it builds? That's worth its weight in gold. It keeps people in the profession. It raises the bar across the board.

So, what can you do now?

- Take a look at your assessment culture. Are you measuring the right things?
- Use FEN tools to support real-time, in-practice development—not after-the-fact paperwork.
- Train assessors who can mentor, guide, and evaluate consistently.
- Make assessment part of the pulse of the department—not a task to tick off.

Because better assessment doesn't just make things safer—it makes your team stronger.

And that's the secret. Not more policies. Just better ways of turning potential into performance.