Abdominal pain: Is hospitalisation always necessary?

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Crippling abdominal pain could be many things, so going to hospital to be sure that your appendix isn't about to burst is probably the best advice, but how many patients does a hospital see with ‘acute abdominal pain’ on daily basis? How many of these patients have ‘self-limiting’ abdominal pain (pain that heals itself) and how many patients with these symptoms stayed for longer than 10 hours despite not requiring surgery?

These are just some of the questions that led Dr Kirsten De Burlet, a Surgical Trainee in General Surgery at the Capital & Coast District Health Board and PhD candidate at the University of Otago, New Zealand to conduct a study with the aim of improving hospital efficiencies.

According to Dr De Burlet, acute abdominal pain is a common surgical presentation with a wide range of causes, but despite many being admitted with self-limiting problems, length of stay was increasing.

“This study examined length of stay before and after the introduction of a quality improvement programme that aimed to rapidly discharge patients with only self-limiting diagnoses,” Dr De Burlet said.

Dr De Burlet said that the aim of her project was to increase efficiencies at Wellington Hospital and reduce the average length of time patients who were presenting with self-limiting abdominal pain were staying by better assessing whether they actually needed to be admitted.

Implementing registrar education, patient education, consultant lead ward rounds and feedback on outcomes, Dr De Burlet’s study revealed that after implementation, early discharge of patients presenting with self-limiting abdominal pain had increased.

The study also found that the increase in early discharges for patients presenting with self-limiting problems had not resulted in an increase of re-presentations to the hospital or other adverse events.

“This provides considerable cost savings, would lead to improvement in care of patients with more urgent diagnoses and would enable more efficient use of health care resources,” she said.

Dr De Burlet will be presenting a poster at the upcoming Royal Australasian College of Surgeons’ 87th Annual Scientific Congress which is being held in Sydney between 7-11 May. The congress brings together some of the top surgical and medical minds from across New Zealand, Australia, and the rest of the world.

For more information about the Annual Scientific Congress please visit: https://asc.surgeons.org/.

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Media inquiries:  Gabrielle Forman, Communications and Policy Officer
t: +61 3 9276 7430 | m: +61 498 218 008