



Reuters Images

If you're looking for an escape from your Christmas lunch, you could always throw on a turkey-coloured T-shirt or dab on a bit of prawn-coloured face paint, following the lead of Chinese artist Liu Bolin. Liu, also known as the "vanishing artist", has mastered the art of painting himself to "disappear" in virtually any surrounding, such as the vegetable section of this supermarket in Beijing last month.

## From the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care

### Improving clinical handover in Australian hospitals and community settings

About seven million clinical handovers occur annually in Australian hospitals and a further 26 million are carried out in community settings.<sup>1</sup> Suboptimal clinical handover results in communication breakdowns that contribute to serious, but preventable, adverse events and harm to patients.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, effective communication of critical information during clinical handover improves patient safety by helping staff better plan their workloads, clarify their understanding of and responsibilities for patient care, and more confidently seek advice from senior staff.<sup>3</sup>

Currently, processes used for clinical handover are highly variable. They commonly lack structure and formal procedures for documentation and communication, and can therefore have a negative influence on patient care.<sup>4</sup>

The Australian Commission

on Safety and Quality in Health Care (ACSQHC) has developed, in collaboration with health service providers, technical experts, health professionals and consumers, National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards, to help health services identify the areas where actions can be taken to effectively reduce identified risks to patients, reduce adverse events and improve the quality of health service provision.

NSQHS Standard 6 is the Clinical Handover Standard. It aims to implement and ensure timely, relevant and structured clinical handover that supports safe patient care throughout a health service.

The ACSQHC developed the NSQHS Standards to be applied across all settings of care and used in accrediting health services such as hospitals and day-procedure services under new national arrangements. Other health services may choose to use the NSQHS

Standards for their internal quality systems.

The transition phase for the NSQHS Standards is currently starting, and is expected to run for about 18 months. Its aim is to allow health services to work alongside accreditation agencies and health departments, with support from the ACSQHC, as they work towards full implementation of the NSQHS Standards from January 2013.

For more information, please visit the Commission's website (<http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au>).

- 1 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Australia's Health 2006. Canberra: AIHW, 2006.
- 2 Cummings E, Showell C, Roehrer E, et al. Discharge, referral and admission: a structured evidence based literature review. Hobart: eHealth Services Research Group, University of Tasmania, 2010.
- 3 Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care. External evaluation of the National Clinical Handover Initiative Pilot Program. Final report. Sydney: ACSQHC, 2011.
- 4 Bomba DT, Prakash R. A description of hand-over processes in an Australian public hospital. *Aust Health Rev* 2005; 29: 68-79.

**Suellen Allen**  
Program Manager

**Margaret Banks**  
Acting Senior Operations  
Manager

Australian Commission  
on Safety and Quality in  
Health Care

doi: 10.5694/mja11.s1205

## Career peaks shift over time

When do we produce our best ideas? In the field of science it's likely to happen later in life than in the past, according to US research. A study of Nobel Laureates in chemistry, physics and medicine since the start of the 20th century showed that before 1905, two-thirds did their prize-winning work before the age of 40 and 20% before the age of 30. In the year 2000, in contrast, only 19% of great achievements in the three scientific fields occurred by age 40. Medical breakthroughs before age 30 have also declined over time. The researchers point to two reasons: the type of breakthroughs honoured by the Prize (theoretical versus empirical) and the increasing length of time it takes scientists to be trained and begin their career.

*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 2011; 7 November (online)

## Did England's 4-hour rule work?

As the Australian Government phases in the 4-hour target for emergency departments (EDs), it could look to the experience of England, where the 4-hour rule operated from 2005. In England, it was mandated that the maximum length of ED stay for 98% of patients could be no longer than 4 hours. The rule aimed to prevent ED overcrowding, but new research shows it had mixed results. A study looking at 735 588 ED visits in May and June of 2003 to 2006 found that the proportion of patients treated within 4 hours improved markedly, from 83.9% to 96.3%. However, the average length of ED stay actually increased by 8.6 minutes, perhaps because once the 4-hour cut-off is breached, the patient's length of stay becomes irrelevant to the target. The research also found, in accord with 2004 research, that more patients were being pushed through to admission or discharge at the last minute. The proportion of patients leaving the ED within 20 minutes of the 4-hour cut-off increased from 4.7% in 2003 to 8.4% in 2006. The researchers wrote that "a stringent absolute cutoff may not be the best way to manage ED crowding".

*Ann Emerg Med* 2011; 16 November (online)

## From the MJA archives

MJA 1991; 2/16 December (edited extract)

### The children of Chernobyl

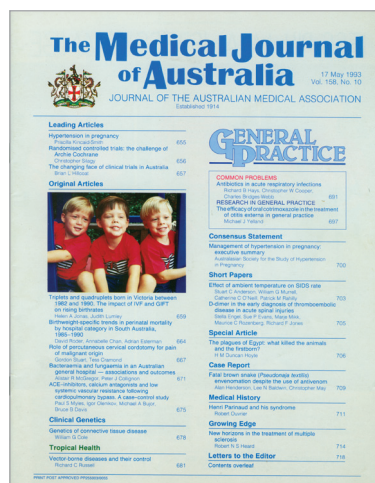
Science fiction became shocking reality in the Soviet Union on 26 April 1986 when a reactor exploded at the Chernobyl nuclear power station.

In March 1991, 42 children aged 10–14 years from orphanages in the Ukraine arrived in Australia to spend one month away from the contaminated areas of their homeland.

As medical adviser for this visit, I saw how some of the children of Chernobyl benefited from their holiday away from radioactivity.

The children had been selected on the basis that they were comparatively fit and well ... and yet by Australian standards most of them were significantly underweight for their height and several were found to be suffering from the effects of chronic radiation exposure and malnutrition, such as anaemia and mild thyroid disorders.

It was fascinating to watch these children integrate into their host families. Their hosts were surprised that the children already knew a few words of English, such as "Coca Cola", "Reeboks" and "bubblegum". They quickly became adept at riding bicycles, playing computer



games and operating a video player and showed a strong preference for American rock music, Ninja videos, blue jeans and bananas.

At the end of their stay the health of most of the children had improved markedly. They had gained weight (an average of 3–5 kg per child), they had a lot more energy, their skin and other chronic infections had cleared up and they were less anaemic. Psychologically, most were a lot happier and brighter. Many returned home with renewed motivation about what they were going to achieve in the future.

*Dr Michael Kidd, senior lecturer,  
Monash University*

## How meditation affects the brain

Mindfulness-based meditation has been shown to have various clinical benefits, such as in treating pain, substance use disorders, anxiety disorders and depression. However, there is no consensus as to the neural mechanisms of meditation. New US research has used functional magnetic resonance imaging scans on experienced and novice meditators to analyse brain activation patterns during different meditations. During meditation, the experienced meditators were found to have decreased activity in the default mode network — an area of the brain associated with attention lapses, anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Alzheimer disease. They were also found to have stronger activity in brain regions associated with self-monitoring and cognitive control, even when not meditating. Professor Judson Brewer, lead author of the study and a psychiatrist from Yale University, said: "the hallmark of many forms of mental illness is a preoccupation with one's own thoughts, a condition meditation seems to affect. This gives us some nice cues as to the neural mechanisms of how it might be working clinically."

*Proceedings of the  
National Academy  
of Sciences* 2011; 21  
November (online)



**Sophie McNamara and Amanda Bryan**

doi: 10.5694/mja11.n1205