

Critical Care Triage Protocol

What is a triage protocol?

It is an objective, evidence-based tool used during an influenza pandemic to assist healthcare providers in making difficult decisions about which patients will get critical care when the demand for those resources exceeds their availability. It consists of a series of very specific questions that assess a patient's condition. The protocol also includes a process that outlines when and how the provincial triage protocol would be implemented.

Why is a protocol needed?

In the event of a pandemic that causes an extraordinary demand on critical care services, the province would monitor the availability of critical care beds. If we ever got to the point where access to existing and temporary beds was becoming limited, a triage protocol would be implemented province-wide to ensure all Nova Scotians would have equal access to services.

When would the protocol be used?

In extremely rare or extra-ordinary circumstances, if ever. It would only be used if there were patients in 80 per cent of the province's normal critical care and additional temporary critical care beds added as part of the province's response to a pandemic.

It is worth noting that during the second wave of H1N1 in Nova Scotia in 2009-10, while some temporary critical care beds were opened the province did not even come close to needing to apply a triage protocol.

How does it work?

The protocol would be used by any doctor in a Nova Scotia hospital who is considering admitting a patient to a critical care bed. The admitting doctor would engage a Triage Officer, a doctor who is responsible for doing an assessment to see if a patient meets the criteria for receiving critical care services or other treatment and care.

It is important to note that the protocol would not be applied by any individual facility, but would be applied province wide. That means that as doctors assess who needs care, patients from across the province are all being considered at the same time, and will receive the same access to care, no matter where they live.

How would it be managed?

The critical care triage process will be managed by a Central Triage Committee, which will be made up of clinicians and health consultants from across the province. It will provide oversight and direction to doctors and other care providers. It will also be responsible for managing a review process.

What is a review process?

If a patient or family member believes there has been an error in processing the patient or understanding their actual health status, a review can be requested. It will be conducted by a provincial Review Officer, who will assess new medical or health information in order to re-evaluate the patient's condition. If the review identifies any reason to change the clinical triage decision, the patient will be put back in the queue to receive critical care. If a review finds there is no reason to overturn the original clinical decision, the patient will return to the queue to receive supportive care.

How many critical care beds does Nova Scotia have?

While this number can vary, we have about 216 licensed critical care beds, spread across the province in all our regional hospitals and through the QEII Health Sciences Centre. The province also has the ability, in an emergency, to open and staff an additional 153 temporary critical care beds.

Why don't we have more critical care beds?

In normal circumstances, the province only needs a certain amount of critical care beds. It is equally important to have beds, and staff, available for other purposes, such as minor surgery.

Do we have enough ventilators to treat pandemic patients?

We know that during the second wave of H1N1 in Nova Scotia, we did not use many ventilators. While we don't know what the need might be in the future, we have ensured we have as many ventilators available as can be staffed at any one time. There are 220 critical care and 23 transport ventilators in the province with an additional 26 critical care ventilators to be delivered by March 31, 2010. In deciding the right number of ventilators to purchase, the province worked with districts to determine how many health care providers were trained, or could be trained, to run the new equipment.

How can we find out more about the critical care triage protocol?

The protocol is available on the web site for the province's pandemic plan at http://www.gov.ns.ca/pandemic/pandemic_plan.asp . Individuals who want to comment on the protocol can send their remarks in writing to the Critical Care Triage Working Group in care of dohweb@gov.ns.ca or to PO Box 488, Halifax, NS, B3J 2R8.