

THE FUTURE OF ACCREDITATION: WHAT'S NEXT FOR HOSPITALS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Accreditation has played a critical role in strengthening safety and quality across Australia's hospitals since the introduction of the NSQHS Standards in 2013. [1] Over this time, hospitals have increasingly relied on accreditation not only as a compliance requirement but as a framework for cultural and system-wide improvement. The health system continues to evolve rapidly, with digital technologies, regulatory changes, increased transparency expectations and more complex care pathways reshaping how care is delivered.

These shifts imply the need for accreditation to continue evolving. This brief outlines emerging directions for hospital accreditation in Australia and identifies opportunities to further support continuous, consumer-centred and digitally enabled care.

PROBLEM/ISSUES

Accreditation has long underpinned safe, high-quality care, yet the environment in which health services operate is changing rapidly. Digital disruption, evolving regulatory expectations and the growing influence of patients and communities are redefining how care is delivered and measured.

The health system is becoming more interconnected, with multiple frameworks spanning tertiary and specialist care, mental health, primary care, aged care, paediatrics and imaging. This broader ecosystem is driving the development of modules and approaches that better reflect the diversity of service delivery across Australia.

Expectations are also shifting towards continuous assurance. With real-time data increasingly available and risks emerging more dynamically, health services are moving away from periodic preparation cycles towards models that emphasise ongoing visibility of performance and everyday readiness. While the maturity of electronic medical records, dashboards, feedback platforms and safety systems varies across services, these tools provide growing opportunities for accreditation processes to draw on live information and automated insights.

Patients and communities are likewise reshaping expectations, with greater emphasis on transparency, cultural safety and lived experience driving a stronger focus on person-centred care and meaningful consumer partnership.

Workforce capability and sustainability continue to influence engagement with accreditation, with new approaches to digital learning, micro-credentialling and skill development emerging across the sector.

Together, these shifts reflect a broader evolution in health care, one where accreditation must align with a system that is more digital, interconnected and centred on people. These trends mirror international observations, with recent ISQua-supported reviews highlighting the global evolution of accreditation systems and the increasing focus on contemporary models of care. [2]

INTERVENTION/APPROACHES

Across Australia and globally, several developments are influencing how hospital accreditation may likely evolve in the years ahead.

REAL-TIME, DATA-DRIVEN ACCREDITATION

Continuous monitoring through EMRs (Electronic Medical Records), patient platforms and safety dashboards is shifting accreditation from periodic review to ongoing assessment. Real-time insights support earlier risk detection, timely action and clearer visibility of improvement. Digital workflows further reduce administrative burden, with evidence generated as a by-product of care and progress tracked in real time.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE(AI) -ASSISTED SELF-ASSESSMENT AND PREDICTIVE AUDITING

AI will be increasingly explored as a tool to support accreditation through evidence collation, pattern recognition and early identification of potential non-conformances. While automation can reduce administrative burden, human judgement will remain essential, with AI augmenting rather than replacing staff.

PERSON-CENTRED AND CO-DESIGNED STANDARDS

There is growing emphasis on embedding consumer and community input in the development and review of accreditation standards. Co-design approaches promote culturally safe, person-centred and equitable care by ensuring lived experience informs quality expectations. As digital platforms become more integrated into accreditation processes, accessibility and inclusivity will be critical.

INTEGRATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL, SOCIAL AND GOVERNANCE (ESG) MEASURES

Accreditation systems are increasingly incorporating measures related to sustainability, workforce wellbeing and data responsibility. As hospitals face climate, social and workforce pressures, ESG integration provides a consistent mechanism for evaluating organisational impact. [3]

MODULAR AND FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS

Modular accreditation pathways allow services to follow assessment approaches aligned to their size, scope and context. This benefits hospitals as well as community-based, smaller or digital-first providers requiring tailored processes. Existing modules, including those for clinical trials, aged care and ambulance services, demonstrate how accreditation is adapting to diverse service types and emerging models of care. [4,5]

INTEROPERABILITY AND WHOLE-OF-SYSTEM ASSESSMENT

Hospitals increasingly operate as part of larger networks of health and social care providers. Accreditation that examines integration, referral pathways, shared governance and accountability will determine how health services operate within their network, to provide genuine connected care for patients.

GAMIFIED, CONTINUOUS LEARNING FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Micro-credentialling and gamified learning platforms are emerging as accessible ways to build routine workforce capability. These approaches help embed quality and safety principles into everyday practice rather than limiting engagement to scheduled accreditation cycles.

LEARNING

Several key lessons emerge from these evolving directions. First, accreditation is shifting toward a model that supports continuous improvement rather than episodic assessment. This requires hospitals to embed systems that enable real-time monitoring and responsiveness, rather than relying on periodic preparation.

Second, consumer partnership must be more deeply integrated into accreditation models. Patient voice, cultural safety and equitable access are fundamental to modern care and should remain central to future standards.

Third, digital capability is critical. Hospitals need systems and skills that allow data to be used meaningfully for reporting, predictive insight and ongoing improvement. Digital transformation should not sit alongside accreditation, it must develop into a core enabler of safe, high-quality care.

Finally, these shifts reinforce that quality and safety cannot be addressed in organisational silos. Accreditation must recognise the interconnected nature of care delivery and support system-level collaboration and governance.

IMPACT FOR PRACTICE

The future of accreditation presents opportunities for hospitals to strengthen continuous readiness, improve patient outcomes and modernise quality systems. Investing in digital infrastructure, automation and data-driven monitoring, hospitals can reduce administrative burden and enhance responsiveness to emerging risks.

Embedding consumer partnerships and cultural safety practices will help services meet rising expectations for transparency and equity. Workforce capability can be strengthened through micro-credentialling, gamified quality improvement and real-time learning platforms that support accreditation-aligned practice.

The growth of modular, flexible and system-level accreditation pathways will enable services to demonstrate excellence in ways that reflect their size, context and model of care, while maintaining alignment with core national standards.

By embracing these shifts, hospitals can position accreditation as a powerful tool for innovation, integration and safe, high-quality care, every day, not just on assessment day.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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