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## Helping hand for patients anxious about hospital visits

An anxiety service for patients, developed by a paediatric anaesthetist at the Queensland Children's Hospital (QCH), is being hailed as a model for other Australian health services and hospitals.

Dr Alexandra Donaldson established the procedural and perioperative anxiety service five years ago to cater for children and their families or carers who experience distress or anxiety about operations or hospital procedures.

She says while patient anxiety is not a new phenomenon, more children are undergoing surgery or medical procedures because of medical advances in surgical techniques and procedures.

The success of the QCH clinic will feature in Dr Donaldson's presentation on patient anxiety at the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists' (ANZCA) Annual Scientific Meeting (ASM) in Brisbane from Saturday 4 May to Tuesday 7 May.

Paediatric anaesthetists in other states are now adapting the clinic's approach for similar services in hospitals and private practice.

"There is now a much greater awareness about patient anxiety among medical specialists (including anaesthetists) and other healthcare workers – so what we are trying to do is make sure young patients aren't overwhelmed or distressed. Anxiety around blood tests, vaccinations and even a visit to their local GP are all indications that some help may be needed," she explains.

Dr Donaldson says babies, toddlers, young children and teenagers can all experience anxiety at various times and the clinic helps address their distress and fear, and improve the hospital experience for the patient, the family / support people and the staff.

"Babies may experience separation anxiety before a procedure so sometimes all that is needed is for a parent or carer to hold them close on their lap and cuddle them before their anaesthetic instead of placing them directly on the operating theatre bed."

"For some older children their anxiety is so extreme that their surgery has to be cancelled and rescheduled. When that happens, we look at what modifications we can make and it may involve bringing the child and their family in for a tour of the hospital and operating theatre beforehand so they know what to expect."

The service also treats children with special needs including children or young adults who are neurodivergent.

Other techniques that anaesthetists use to calm children before their operations include distraction techniques and hypnosis which have been proven as effective methods to reduce anxiety.

The service is complemented by a suite of online resources called EPIC (Effective Peri-Procedural Communication) developed by the Society for Paediatric Anaesthesia in New Zealand and Australia.

More than 2000 anaesthetists and specialist pain medicine physicians from Australia, New Zealand, the US, the UK, Ireland, Hong Kong and Malaysia are attending the ASM at the Brisbane Convention Centre.

ANZCA is responsible for the training, examination and specialist accreditation of anaesthetists and pain medicine specialists and for the standards of clinical practice in Australia and New Zealand.

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