Antibiotic prescribing: how to achieve policy compliance?

The antimicrobial prescribing policy of a major Sydney teaching hospital has been revised following an AIHI study which highlighted widespread misuse of antibiotics by prescribers.

The study was conducted by Dr Melissa Baysari of the Centre for Health Systems and Safety Research to evaluate compliance with the hospital’s policy on antibiotic prescribing.

Most hospitals have introduced antimicrobial stewardship programs to reduce the inappropriate use of antibiotics and antimicrobial resistance, but few evaluations have been undertaken to determine whether the policies actually reduce misuse of antibiotics.

Doctors’ prescribing habits were audited for 12 weeks. Each week they received an email providing feedback on the extent to which they had followed correct procedures in their prescribing.

The study did not result in improved compliance with the hospital’s policy, but it uncovered a raft of practical problems with the policy itself.

Doctors indicated some elements of the policy were inconsistent with Australian therapeutic guidelines, that they were given contradictory instructions by more senior doctors, that the guidelines were sometimes ambiguous, and that there were practical difficulties with the approval process.

These findings were sent to the hospital’s Antimicrobial Stewardship Committee, which has since addressed the specific barriers to behavioural change, for example by clarifying ambiguities and inconsistencies.

“Hospitals implement these kinds of stewardship programs without tailoring them to the specific audience and without doing any evaluation of whether they are working,” Dr Baysari said.

“Doing an evaluation like this gave us the ability to really scrutinise and map out the process prescribers need to take. It is important for all hospitals to do this kind of evaluation.”