

# Emergency Nurse

## How can I Improve my Decision Making in Triage? A Practice Development Question

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## How can I Improve my Decision Making in Triage?

Triage is a multifaceted skill, with significant outcomes for the patient. Being able to accurately triage patients is key to safe and effective practice. Knowing how to improve your own decision making can lead to better patient outcomes and improved use of emergency department resources.

### Algorithms

Triage algorithms are specifically developed to guide triage decisions, and as such familiarity with their processes is significant to successful triage. New triage nurses may find strictly following algorithms helpful as they are effective for providing direction to those learning the procedure (Johannessen, 2016). Yet despite evidence that more experienced nurses feel the algorithms are less accurate (Mistry, 2016), they may benefit from viewing them as guidelines to support their decision-making process, whilst considering the results against their clinical judgement (Johannessen, 2016).

Familiarising oneself with the most common triage frameworks can help cement understanding of the disposition of patients (Stanfield, 2015). The main systems used in the UK, [Manchester Triage System](#) and [Emergency Severity Index](#) have training available on their respective websites.

### Patient assessments

Being able to competently undertake patient assessment forms the basis of triage and is a vital skill for triage nurses. More advanced forms of assessment are available through paid courses, but a simple way to improve your assessment practice is by refreshing your knowledge of [ABCDE assessment](#). Whilst many nurses only consider these as emergency guidelines, it provides an easy-to-follow framework to guide the assessment process.

Roscoe et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of verbal stories and how it forms part of acuity assessment, in conjunction with vital signs and visual cues. One of their key findings was that understanding the narrative of the patient story can significantly improve nurses' ability to make triage decisions, and [narrative competency training](#) was recommended.

### Training and Experience

Training and experience are both linked to an increased ability to accurately perform triage, however neither alone is enough to ensure competency (Stanfield, 2015)., Tam et al. (2018) reviewed research and found the impact of singular triage training sessions is questionable, however, regular structured training is highlighted as an effective method. One guide to establishing this continuous development in triage skills is to apply the [National Curriculum and Competency Framework for Emergency Nursing](#), a framework which includes fundamental skills for triage and provides a guide for training needs.

### Case Discussion

One further method of increasing experience is to consider patient presentations after the fact, whether via [reflection](#), case presentation or even an informal discussion with colleagues. By considering your decision-making process you may examine alternatives that had not occurred in practice, and colleagues can provide an objective perspective, with Bowen et al., (2016) finding that consulting colleagues helped staff feel more experienced and able to make their own decisions.

### Environment

Ensuring that the environment triage is performed in is suitable can lead to improvements in triage ability. Johannessen (2016) found that interruptions increased in open triage environments, resulting in disruptions to the nurses' thought processes. Stanfield (2015) considered the effects of a lack of privacy on patients' willingness to divulge personal information and suggested private areas elicited more honest conversations. Overcrowded emergency departments also negatively affect triage, with nurses reducing the assessment process to a simpler form to cope with the increased workload (Reay et al., 2020).

Johnson (2021) suggests that nurses consider what questions are essential for the triage process, and what can be asked later, to ensure efficiency and reduce waiting times. Whilst no easy fix exists for emergency department overcrowding, and the temptation to resort to pure intuition rises, Wolf (2010) highlighted that whilst intuition is frequently used to make triage decisions, it is important to ensure that these intuitive decisions are corroborated with more concrete assessments to ensure accuracy.

#### Recommendations

- Ensure familiarity with your triage system
- Learn patient assessment methods to direct your investigation
- Improve narrative competency to enable you to understand your patient
- Examine training and experiential needs for future development
- Reflect on your decisions, whether individually or with colleagues
- Create a safe and private triage environment

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