About VASM

The Victorian Audit of Surgical Mortality (VASM) is a collaboration between the Victorian Government's Department of Health, the Victorian Surgical Consultative Council and the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.

The VASM utilises a peer-review process to review all deaths associated with surgical care. There are a small percentage of cases which require a further in-depth review of patient case notes, which are requested from the hospitals.

Qualified Privilege

The Qualified Privilege (QP) declaration encourages surgeon participation within the mortality audits by strictly protecting the confidentiality of information gained in the audit.

The mortality audit are not permitted to disclose information or documents which is identifying to anyone other than the surgeon involved in the case or the surgeons specifically assigned to provide a peer-review assessment of the case. A person who discloses information stemming from the declared activity either indirectly or directly to another person or a court of law faces a possible penalty of up to 2 years imprisonment (Section 124Y, Health Insurance Act 1973).

Subject to limited exceptions, providing audit information to Chief Executive Officers or Surgical/Medical/Clinical Directors at hospitals where the surgeon is practicing is not permitted by law. However, the Federal Minister for Health may authorise disclosure of information that relates to a serious offence against a law in force in any State or Territory.

This means that in the absence of Ministerial approval, identifying information can only be disclosed with the express approval of the individual who would be identified by the disclosure. The release of any such information would be unusual and should only occur after the implications of disclosure are properly considered.

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De-identification of medical records

Medical records consist of patient case notes and medical notes prepared by the hospital. These are requested by the Victorian Audit of Surgical Mortality (VASM) when a case is deemed as requiring a second line assessment. These documents are sent to the VASM either in a hard copy (paper) or soft copy (electronic) format.

Due to legislation in Victoria regarding the Qualified Privilege, certain data identifiers collected / reported to VASM cannot be disclosed to reviewers and stakeholders. VASM has a responsibility to protect the identity of the deceased, their family, the health practitioner such as nurses, doctors, and consultants and the institutions involved such as hospitals and clinics. This process is referred to as “de-identifying”.

What to de-identify

The patient medical records from hospitals include hospital generated forms and generic forms available to all hospitals. The following information should be concealed (de-identified):

- Patient’s name, addresses, and telephone/fax number/s.
- Patient’s relative’s name/s, address, and telephone/fax number/s.
- UR number, Medicare number, pension number, post mortem/coroner’s ID.
- Hospital name/s, address, telephone number/s, fax numbers, email address, hospital barcodes, and initials such as: BH (Barwon Health), GH (Geelong), SH (Southern Health), MMC (Monash Medical Centre), AH (Austin), EH (Eastern Health), SV (St Vincent’s) or WH (Western Health).
- Nurse’s names, page number, and signature/s.
- Registrar’s, GP’s, and other allied health’s name/s, address, telephone number/s, fax number/s, email address, and signature/s.
- Consultant/Fellow/Surgeon’s name/s, address, telephone number/s, fax number/s, email address, and signature/s.
- Ambulance details such as: Metro or Rural.

What not to de-identify

The following information should not be concealed, as it may be relevant to the peer review process:

- Patient age, date of birth, gender, and ethnicity.
- Seniority and title of the Clinician/Specialist.

Where most identifiers are

Generally, the identifiers are located on the following:

- Headers.
- Footers.
- Side labels.
- Hospital stationery.
- The body of the medical notes.
- Start and end of the written medical notes entry.

To de-identify hard copy (paper) medical notes

Paper medical notes are de-identified using the following:

- Labels (large and small)
- Correction tape

Information should be covered either with the correction tape or label to prevent it being seen by the reviewer.

- Do not use markers as the ink bleeds through to the next page.
To de-identify soft copy (electronic) medical notes

Electronic medical notes are de-identified using the Adobe features available in the Tools section, under the ‘Protection’ tab.

To remove watermarks/overlaying objects

There have been some problems with redactions occurring on every page and not just the page they were meant for. This occurs when redactions are applied to overlaying objects such as the ‘copy only’ watermark of the page, which then applies the redaction to every watermark in the document.

To rectify this, go to the Tools section and select the ‘Protection’ tab, then click on the ‘Remove Hidden Information’ option.

After the document has been scanned for hidden information, click the ‘Remove’ button.
This will merge the watermark with the background object and prevent the unwanted repeating of redactions.

**To mark and apply redactions**

Redactions can be applied to specific areas as required by selecting the ‘Mark for Redaction’ option under the ‘Protection’ tab from the Tools.

Using the mouse, highlight/mark all areas to be de-identified. Once the redactions have been marked, click on the ‘Apply Redactions’ option for all marked areas to be redacted.

**To mark and apply redactions across multiple pages**

It is not unusual for logos to be repeated across multiple pages in the same location on the medical notes. These can be marked across multiple pages by right-clicking the marked redaction on the logo, and selecting the ‘Repeat mark across pages’ option.
A new pop-up will appear with different repeat options available.

If the logo is present in the same location across all pages, select the ‘All pages’ option and click ‘Ok’.

If the logo is present in the same location across a specific number of pages, verify the page range for the logo to be redacted and then update the ‘Specify range’ field before clicking on ‘Ok’.

The logos that are present in the same location should all be marked for redaction, these can be redacted by selecting the ‘Apply Redactions’ option.

**To search and redact specific text**

Depending on how the medical notes were made electronically, there may be some pages which allow for text to be searchable. This feature allows for certain keywords (such as names and UR numbers) to be quickly identified.

The search function can be accessed via the ‘Search & Remove Text’ option under the ‘Protection’ tab from the Tools.

A new pop-up window will appear which will allow you to enter the text you want to search for. Once you have entered your text, click ‘Search & Remove Text’.
All searchable pages within the document will be searched for the text entered and provide a list of all instances where the text is present.

Before ticking each instance, ensure that the text is correct and not part of another word that is part of the patient’s admission stay description. Once all instances have been checked and ticked, click on ‘Mark Checked Results for Redaction’.