

## The imperative of safe and quality healthcare

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Prof Nurs Today 2025;29(1):24-25

In an ideal world, safe and high-quality healthcare should be an inherent expectation, not a luxury. Unfortunately, access to such care often feels like a rarity, celebrated when it occurs, but expected in every instance. Quality healthcare should be the standard, not the exception.



The Office of Health Standards Compliance (OHSC) is the health regulator of South Africa and plays a critical role in ensuring that healthcare services meet rigorous safety and quality standards. Its mandate is to foster an environment where healthcare establishments consistently adhere to regulated norms and standards through comprehensive compliance inspections. These inspections are designed to evaluate the processes and systems in place within health establishments. Institutions that demonstrate compliance earn a certificate of compliance from the OHSC, signalling their commitment to safe and high-quality healthcare, which, in turn, strengthens trust among patients and stakeholders.

Both public and private health sectors are subject to these inspections, which are a mandatory process and not a voluntary one, and health establishments are required to register with the OHSC.

Healthcare professionals, by the very nature of their demanding roles, often fall into a rhythm—performing their duties day after day, sometimes without conscious thought. This autopilot mode, where tasks are carried out with minimal deliberation, can lead to oversights and a failure to recognise areas in need of improvement. Factors contributing to this phenomenon include staff shortages, overwhelming patient volumes, and the pervasive challenge of fatigue.

At the heart of healthcare are the patients, the most vulnerable individuals who place their trust in the hands of healthcare workers. It is imperative to pause and consider: Do we, as healthcare professionals, truly view our actions through the eyes of the patient? Are we questioning the impact of our actions on those who depend on us, or are we simply justifying them without deeper reflection?

Increasingly, health establishments, whether public or private, seek the guidance and expertise of the OHSC to better understand the requirements of the inspection tools. The OHSC offers guidance and support workshops, not only to help these institutions comply but also to address gaps in their systems, ensuring that processes are comprehensive and well-implemented. The latest versions of the inspection tools are made publicly available on the OHSC website, making the inspection process an “open-book test” to healthcare establishments. Inspection tools are developed in an incremental approach, and the current tools available are the inspection tools for Central and Tertiary Hospitals, District and Regional Hospitals, Private Acute Hospitals, Clinics, Community Health Centres, and General Practices.

These inspection tools encompass both clinical and non-clinical requirements, focusing on processes and systems that healthcare institutions must adhere to provide consistent, safe, quality care. By evaluating these processes, the OHSC helps health establishments foster a culture of continuous improvement, where meeting standards becomes a routine part of operations rather than a sporadic achievement.

In addition to these inspections, the OHSC offers targeted training through guidance and support workshops. During these sessions, the inspection tools’ requirements are unpacked and explained in detail, providing a clear understanding of what is expected. These workshops also focus on the development of Quality Improvement Plans, equipping health establishments with the knowledge to identify areas for improvement and actively address them. These workshops are available to health establishments

across all provinces, districts, and hospital groups and are delivered in a flexible format—virtual, in-person, or hybrid—making them accessible to a wide audience.

Importantly, the workshops offer a platform for implementers of the tools to ask questions and gain clarity on any aspect of the inspection measures. Each measure is linked to an explanatory note, providing a standardised breakdown of what inspectors will evaluate. For example, it may specify that three patient files will be selected from a particular period (e.g. the past three months) for review. This approach ensures consistency among inspectors and provides implementers with clear guidance when conducting their own self-assessments, helping them identify areas for improvement.

While the process-driven nature of these standards may sometimes appear overwhelming, it is essential to recognise their value in shaping the patient experience. Adhering to these processes creates an environment where patients can feel safe, supported, and confident in the care they

receive. Research consistently shows that a positive patient experience has a significant impact on clinical outcomes, further emphasising the importance of quality standards in healthcare.

In addition to regular inspections, health establishments are required to conduct annual self-assessments, allowing them to identify any gaps in compliance and work proactively to address them. Compliance with processes is crucial, but true quality healthcare is built on everyday practices. By addressing one requirement at a time and focusing on incremental improvements, health establishments can achieve long-term, meaningful progress.

Ultimately, the vision of the OHSC is simple yet powerful: quality care for all. This vision is not just a goal but a collective responsibility—one that begins with each individual's actions. The work we do every day has far-reaching implications, contributing to a healthcare system in South Africa where quality and safe care are not merely aspirations but the unwavering standard.