# Parental intuition outperforms vital signs in spotting child illness, study finds



A recent study from Monash University in Melbourne has highlighted the critical role parental intuition plays in identifying child illnesses, surpassing the effectiveness of traditional vital signs. This finding supports the push for Martha's Rule, an initiative currently being piloted in England that allows families to request a second opinion if they feel their child's condition is deteriorating. The study examined nearly 190,000 emergency admissions involving children, revealing that in 19.3% of cases, parents identified their child's deterioration before clinical indicators did. This significant discrepancy underscores the necessity of integrating families into the healthcare decision-making process for paediatric patients.

The research, published in The Lancet's Child and Adolescent Health journal, demonstrated a strong correlation between parental concerns and the need for critical interventions, such as respiratory support or mechanical ventilation. Specifically, when parents expressed concern, their children were almost four times more likely to be admitted to intensive care compared to those whose parents did not voice any worries. These findings suggest that attentiveness to parental input can lead to earlier and potentially life-saving treatments.

This emphasis on family involvement is especially poignant given the tragic story of Martha Mills. After suffering a fall and developing sepsis, Martha's condition tragically deteriorated while in hospital care, despite her parents repeatedly alerting doctors to their concerns. A coroner concluded that earlier intervention could have saved her life, igniting a campaign led by her parents to implement systemic changes in the NHS. Speaking about the initiative, Martha's mother, Merope Mills, noted the importance of recognising parents as integral to the healthcare process.

Martha's Rule encompasses several components aimed at refining patient safety. It empowers families, caregivers, and medical staff, allowing them to seek independent medical reviews if their concerns about a patient’s care are inadequately addressed. This formalised escalation route seeks to dismantle hierarchical barriers within medical settings and enhance collaborative approaches to care. The hope is to foster an environment where parental concerns are treated with the seriousness they deserve, reducing preventable harm in healthcare.

Since the rollout of Martha's Rule in April 2024, early data has indicated a positive impact on patient outcomes. Reports show that the initiative has led to hundreds of calls for urgent reviews, with many instances resulting in immediate changes to patient care. About one in five reviews prompted life-saving interventions, marking a transformative shift in how health systems respond to emerging clinical concerns. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Victoria Atkins, has acknowledged the initiative's potential to empower patients and families, further bridging the gap between clinical staff and the concerns raised by those closest to the patient.

As the evidence mounts in favour of parental intuition, it is increasingly clear that integrating family insight into clinical assessments not only humanises healthcare but also enhances patient safety. By acknowledging parents as vital team members in a child's healthcare journey, hospitals can ensure that intuitive insights play a critical role in delivering timely and effective medical care, ultimately saving lives.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/30/parental-intuition-better-at-spotting-child-illness-than-vital-signs-study-finds-marthas-rule), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/30/parental-intuition-better-at-spotting-child-illness-than-vital-signs-study-finds-marthas-rule)
* Paragraph 2 – [[3]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/patient-safety/marthas-rule/), [[6]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-02-21/debates/24022125000011/MarthaSRule)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/marthas-rule), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/17/marthas-rule-having-transformative-effect-nhs-england-data-shows)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martha%27s_Rule), [[6]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-02-21/debates/24022125000011/MarthaSRule)
* Paragraph 5 – [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/17/marthas-rule-having-transformative-effect-nhs-england-data-shows)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/30/parental-intuition-better-at-spotting-child-illness-than-vital-signs-study-finds-marthas-rule> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/may/30/parental-intuition-better-at-spotting-child-illness-than-vital-signs-study-finds-marthas-rule> - A study from Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, indicates that parental intuition is more effective than vital signs in predicting critical illness in children. The research, published in The Lancet's journal on Child and Adolescent Health, analysed nearly 190,000 emergency hospital visits involving children. It found that parental concern was linked to a higher likelihood of the child requiring respiratory assistance or mechanical ventilation. Notably, in 19.3% of cases, parents identified deterioration before vital signs did. This underscores the importance of involving parents as active members of a child's care team in hospitals. The study also highlights the tragic case of Martha Mills, who died in 2021 after doctors ignored her parents' concerns about her deteriorating condition, leading to a coroner's ruling that earlier intervention could have saved her life.
3. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/patient-safety/marthas-rule/> - Martha's Rule is a patient safety initiative introduced in NHS hospitals to empower patients, families, carers, and staff to seek an urgent review if they believe a patient's condition is deteriorating and their concerns are not being addressed. The initiative comprises three components: daily assessments of patients' feelings and conditions, allowing staff to request reviews from different teams if concerns are not responded to, and providing patients and families with an escalation route to raise concerns. The rule aims to improve the quality and safety of care for patients whose condition is worsening, recognising the critical role of patients and families in the care process.
4. <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/marthas-rule> - Martha's Rule is a patient safety initiative currently being piloted in England, designed to empower staff, patients, and their families to seek an independent medical review if they feel their concerns about a patient's care are not being adequately addressed. Named after Martha Mills, a 13-year-old girl who tragically died in 2021 following missed opportunities to treat sepsis, the rule aims to ensure better safeguards against preventable harm in healthcare settings. It formalises an escalation route for parents, carers, and families to ensure their concerns are listened to and acted upon, encouraging transparency and collaboration in patient care.
5. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martha%27s_Rule> - Martha's Rule is a patient safety initiative implemented in English NHS hospitals from April 2024. It grants patients, families, carers, and staff the right to request a rapid review from a critical care outreach team if they are concerned about a patient's deteriorating condition. The initiative was inspired by the case of Martha Mills, a 13-year-old who died in 2021 after doctors failed to heed her parents' concerns about her deteriorating condition. The rule aims to improve patient safety by empowering patients and families to escalate concerns and by flattening hierarchies within medicine to encourage openness and better listening by clinicians.
6. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-02-21/debates/24022125000011/MarthaSRule> - In a UK Parliament debate on 21 February 2024, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Victoria Atkins, announced the implementation of Martha's Rule in at least 100 acute or specialist NHS sites in England by March 2025. The initiative allows patients and their families to request a rapid review of a patient's case 24 hours a day from someone outside of their immediate care team if they are concerned about deterioration in the patient's condition. This measure was introduced following the tragic death of 13-year-old Martha Mills, who died after doctors failed to act on her parents' concerns about her deteriorating condition.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/dec/17/marthas-rule-having-transformative-effect-nhs-england-data-shows> - Data from NHS England indicates that Martha's Rule is having a transformative effect on patient care. Since its rollout in April 2024, the initiative has led to 573 calls across 143 hospitals, with about half prompting urgent reviews by critical care staff. Approximately one in five of these reviews resulted in changes to the patient's care, such as the administration of life-saving treatments or transfer to intensive care. The data suggests that Martha's Rule is improving patient safety and outcomes by empowering patients and families to escalate concerns about deteriorating conditions.