Introduction:
Bowel management within an ICU environment is often difficult. Recent data collection from an intensive care unit at the RVI identified either loose stool or constipation on > 50% of patient days. It was postulated this could be improved with a more tightly controlled bowel management regimen. To test this hypothesis a step-wise bowel protocol was created and introduced. Data was collected in the 4 month period following its implementation with the following aims:
1) Assess effectiveness of the protocol
2) Further observe the reasons for loose or constipated stool on an ICU

Methods:
Bowel data recorded once a day for each patient. A single recording was defined as ‘one bowel day’. Definitions: Loose stool - type 5-7; Constipated - type 1-2 or BNO for > 3 days; ‘Normal bowel activity’ - type 3-4 or BNO < 3 days. In addition, the number and result of per rectal examinations performed was recorded

Results:
1) 512 bowel days: Constipation 17%, ‘normal bowel’ 59%, loose stools 24%. (NOTE: Pre protocol 693 bowel days collected Constipation 30%, Normal bowel 47%, Loose stools 23%)
2) 86 PRs. 65% empty rectum, 35% stool present
3) Total number of days BO 157. Total number of days BNO 355
4) When BO type of stool as follows: Type 1-2 3 days; Type 3-4 30 days; Type 5-7 124 days

Conclusion:
Re. protocol
1) Did not cause harm
2) Decreased constipation. Increased ‘normal bowel days’
3) loose stool days unchanged - discussion required

Re. Observational
4) When BO predominant motion is loose stools (124 days out of 157 days - 79%) - also seen in previous studies
5*) PR results show 65% of constipation was the result of an empty rectum
6*) Days of non-defecation (355) was significantly larger than defecation (157) - 69% vs 31%.
7*) During the 512 days only 3 were recorded as hard stools
Conclusions from 5)6)7) Constipation in ICU more likely to be the result of non-defecation (reduced activity of the gut/empty gut) than loaded/hard stool. If unable to PR preference should be towards oral laxative as opposed to suppository/enema