Efficiency as a dimension of quality

Most healthcare organizations are explicit in identifying a focus on quality—it’s often embedded in a mission statement or a list of values. But quality is one of those shapeshifting terms that can be hard to pin down. What exactly do we mean when we talk about quality in healthcare? The National Academy of Medicine (formerly the IOM) has identified six domains with which to assess quality in healthcare systems: safety, effectiveness, patient-centeredness, timeliness, efficiency, and equity.

In this issue of Connection, we take a close look at one of these: Efficiency.

Efficiency is the ability to do something without wasting materials, time, or energy. Those familiar with Lean or Six Sigma will recognize efficiency as a driver of those methodologies. While these concepts originated to drive quality improvement in manufacturing, they translate easily and have been widely
Lean process improvement is a team-based effort to enhance performance by removing waste and reducing variation. There are multiple sources of waste inherent in healthcare, but some are more relevant to ambulatory settings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Waste</th>
<th>Looks Like</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Redundant forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collecting data that is not used</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unnecessary diagnostic testing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Duplicative testing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Slow or ineffective communications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inventory</td>
<td>Expiring supplies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opening unnecessary supplies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Excessive Motion</td>
<td>Physical layout that requires continuous movement of patients, staff, supplies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting</td>
<td>Delayed appointments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delayed treatments pending documentation or supplies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Potential</td>
<td>Employees who are disengaged, feel unsupported or unheard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Who’s the “customer”?

Lean thinking seeks to eliminate the parts of a process that don’t add value for the customer. Most healthcare organizations will immediately identify the patient as “the customer,” but in practice, processes that are designed for the convenience of providers may tell a different story. Look at the flow of your key processes to consider how your organization addresses this question.

For example, a single specialty ASC allows for different preference cards for individual surgeons who perform the same procedures. A certain level of inefficiency (consider inventory, motion, waiting) may be the result and it is the surgeons who are being treated as the customer in this case.

Defining your most important customer will reveal a lot about the culture of your organization; it also points the way to where to focus efforts to eliminate non-value-added steps.

Where’s the waste?

Waste is identified by looking at key processes to evaluate steps that are included but fail to add value. Below are two examples in which the patient is the intended customer.

In a primary care setting, consider the flow of a basic office visit. Evaluate the process from the first contact — scheduling an appointment. Then, physically
follow the movement of a patient once s/he arrives at your office. Don’t forget to include post-appointment interactions including booking follow-up appointments, referrals, and communication of test results.

In a surgical setting, begin review of the process for a completed case from referral to intake to pre-op, procedure, post-op, discharge and follow-up.

As you break down the process into components, look at each step from the customer’s point of view. Is it necessary, understandable, convenient? Or is it redundant, confusing, and time-consuming?

**Increasing efficiency decreases frustration**

Everyone has made a call to customer service. Often, you start with an automated system and a request to enter your account number. You may decide that it’s preferable to speak with a live person. You follow prompts that often involve re-entering your account information and when you finally get to the live representative, what’s the first question you are asked? “May I have your account number?”

This is an example of information waste – redundancy that does not add value for the customer, leading to irritation and dissatisfaction.

Think of waste as a kind of reversible mistake. By contrast, a defect is a mistake made permanent. In healthcare, the failure to correct mistakes and institutionalize the correction results in poor outcomes, readmissions, healthcare acquired infections, expense, and dissatisfaction.

**How is accreditation a tool for efficiency?**

1. Standards focus on the patient as customer.
2. Standards require on-going review of policies/processes.
3. Standards drive “closing the loop” on communications.
4. Standards require organizations to address adverse events.
5. Standards institutionalize quality improvement.

**Upcoming Educational Programming**

June 23-24, seminar: [Achieving Accreditation, San Diego](#)

2018 Standards available for Public Comment through May 31

Next year’s Standards, while largely unchanged in content, will look quite...
different in format with the inclusion of a new and highly transparent scoring process. Each Standard includes distinct decision points with yes/no/NA options. This is designed to improve the alignment of organizational self-assessment with surveyor review.

We are seeking your feedback on this new format from May 1-May 31. A separate survey tool is included for each chapter so that you can respond to relevant sections and complete your review over time. Click here to review.

**Patient Safety Toolkits**

New titles released in 2017 in our continuing series of Patient Safety Toolkits:
- Ambulatory Surgery and Preventing Falls (updated 4.2017)
- Antibiotic Stewardship
- Opioid Stewardship

Revisions to previously released titles will not be mailed except to fulfill orders. New titles will be going out soon to the organizations for which they are relevant. Additional copies can be ordered here. Use code CONNEX for a 50% discount through July 31, 2017.

**Contact Us**

**AAAHC**

5250 Old Orchard Road Suite 200
Skokie, IL 60077
P: 847.853.6060 F: 847.853.9028
info@aaahc.org
www.aaahc.org