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Is Quality Driving Your Organization?

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By Daniel J. Sinnott, for HealthLeaders News, December 28, 2006

Economic forces in healthcare are making patients more quality focused and insurance providers push for better outcomes. As a result, the future success of all healthcare organizations depends on their ability to produce high-quality patient outcomes. Insurance companies care about quality because research to date proves that higher quality outcomes reduce the overall expense of the care provided. Patients, of course, care about quality because they cannot afford the high clinical and financial costs associated with poor quality outcomes.

As a recent example of the effect of the public and insurance industry's demand for high-quality outcomes, Aetna helps to encourage high-quality outcomes by releasing to the public quality information on physicians for certain procedures in certain sections of the country. Also, states like Pennsylvania now publish regular quality results for hospitals for certain diagnoses and procedures.

Patients can now review such quality information to help them make decisions about where to attain their healthcare. After they have received their healthcare, they can spread the word about the services they received to other consumers by contributing to Web-based surveys, at sites such as Aetna's DocFind or the non-insurance-based RateMDs.com. So quality healthcare is becoming more transparent to consumers than ever, and they are, as recent trends have shown, willing to travel great distances to receive it.

The hard questions for trustees

The economic future of your organization thus depends on your facility's ability to produce high-quality outcomes on a consistent basis. The key questions for you as a board member when assessing your facility's quality will be the following:

- Do your facility's quality results receive more attention at the regular board meeting than the financial results for the same period?
- Are the quality outcomes being produced and reported at your facility at the highest level when compared with local, regional and national benchmarks?
- Are your facility's quality results higher when compared with other facilities in your city, region and the country as a whole?
- Does the quality of care provided in your facility meet the standards that you would want your loved one to encounter when receiving his or her healthcare?

Once you can answer the above questions affirmatively, you will be well on your way to assessing and achieving quality outcomes in your own organization.

Is your organization ready for change?

If by chance your organization's quality outcomes are not where they should be, then you as a board member must insist on a plan to identify the reasons for the current results. I suggest you ask the question "WHY?" five times for each area where there is a quality concern to dig deep for an explanation. An example of how to use the five why questions was highlighted years ago regarding the Lincoln Memorial. One autumn day, a tourist tried to visit the Lincoln Memorial, only to learn that it was closed. The tourist asked the following



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questions and received the following answers.

1. Why is the Lincoln Memorial closed? For Cleaning.
2. Why does it need to be cleaned? Dirt from pigeons.
3. Why are there pigeons at the memorial? Pigeons love to eat spiders.
4. Why are there spiders at the Lincoln Memorial? Spiders love to eat moths.
5. Why are there moths at the Lincoln Memorial? Moths are attracted to the lights used to illuminate the Lincoln Memorial.

So, by changing the type of lights used to illuminate the Lincoln Memorial, the monument staff was able to eliminate the moths, which eliminated the spiders, which kept the pigeons away and prevented frequent cleaning of the Lincoln Memorial. The same type of persistent questioning should be applied to fully understanding the quality of care provided in your healthcare facility. After you have received an answer to each of the five why questions, then ask for a corrective action plan along with deliverable dates for achieving the desired outcomes.

Some difficult issues will most likely be uncovered as to the reasons why the quality outcomes are not where they need to be. But you as a board member will have to support the corrective action plan to achieve the desired results. Some corrective action plans will cost more money, such as those that call for increased staffing or capital or new equipment. Other plans will be political in nature, for example, by requiring adverse credentialing action on key members of the medical staff or the nursing department. Those tough decisions need to be made in order to improve the overall quality outcomes for your facility.

The board as a whole must let everyone in the organization know that quality is the top priority. Improvement can only occur if everyone knows about the initiative. Then insist that the current quality outcomes be shared throughout the facility so everyone will know the true state of things and focus on the areas that need improvement. Historically we in the healthcare industry have hidden quality results from those providing the everyday care to our patients. Communicating the results will generate more interest and involvement by your staff and produce more constructive ways to improve the quality outcomes. Finally when improvement occurs, communicate this throughout the organization and celebrate the successes.

Changes to the corporate culture

Members of your organization will also be watching to see whether a punitive culture will be created in order to achieve the required quality outcomes. Caution must be given not to create a punitive culture because if this happens then your nurses, physicians, and staff members are likely to under-report quality concerns. Healthcare providers have been taught over the years that if a mistake happens they are better off not reporting it for fear of malpractice repercussions. A safe environment for reporting quality concerns will dramatically increase the amount of reporting that will and needs to occur. In one organization, there was a new graduate registered nurse who made a fatal medication error soon after being hired. It would have been easy to terminate that young nurse, but care was given as to how to develop the nurse to learn from the mistake. The nurse has gone on to be an outstanding leader within the same facility where the original error occurred.

When a bad medical mistake occurs, you need to make sure a root cause analysis has been completed. This analysis will bring all of the parties involved together to learn what happened and also what plan has been developed to prevent a recurrence of the same type of mistake. The final report and corrective action plan should be reported to the board for information and action.


I asked earlier if the quality of care provided in your facility is where you would want your loved one to receive care. In the past when I was trying to improve the quality of care in many organizations and being met with some resistance, I would ask that simple question. In almost every case that question was able to move people beyond the "excuses" justifying why the care was not appropriate and helped people to focus on the solutions that can improve the quality of outcomes.

Healthcare is not an exact science where there will be no errors, but there is great opportunity for improvement. If you seize on that opportunity, your organization will undoubtedly benefit. Over time, the message will get out in the medical and general community that your

facility is serious about quality, and that news will attract high-quality physicians and employees. That same attraction will be noticed by the general public and the insurance industry in your area, which will drive more volume to your facility. The bottom line is "quality will beget quality."

The necessary changes will not occur overnight, but if the board of trustees sends the signal throughout the facility and community that quality is a top priority of the organization, then quality improvement will begin to occur, and you will see a proportional improvement in the financial performance of your facility.

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