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HOW TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF SERVICES IN HOSPITALS

UDAYSING R. MANEPATIL

Associate Professor,
Smt.A.R. Patil Kanya Mahavidyalaya Ichalkarnji.

Abstract:

Quality in health care institutions is different from other organisations because the service, i.e. the patient care, is a multifaceted and multidimensional service and is delivered personally to the customer (the patient) by the doctors, nurses and other staff. Further, because of its role in improving the efficiency of care as well as lowering the cost of treatment in the long run, it is the single most important factor affecting the satisfaction of patients.

KEYWORDS:

Quality , Hospitals , multidimensional , health care .

INTRODUCTION:

Because of market competition, increasing public awareness, criticism of the services being delivered and the demand for high quality services, there has been a wake up call to the health care providers. As a result, the health care providers who have been hitherto insensitive, have started paying attention to the quality aspect of health care.

Determinants of Quality in Health Care:

1. Structure: Conformity of the infrastructure to the laid down norms.
2. Process: Standard of the policies, procedures, operating systems, etc.
3. Outcome: Change in patient's status such as cured, not cured, died, satisfied or not with the care and treatment given. Patient's feedback, surveys and bed occupancy/OPD attendance can be good indicators.

ESSENTIALS OF QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN HEALTHCARE SERVICES.

Improvement of health services is a long drawn relentless process. It can be achieved by implementing a carefully planned program of quality management. The program has to be :

1. Well planned and meticulously executed.
2. It has to be organization wide covering all areas/departments without ignoring even a single department or service. Since all services are interlinked and inter dependent, poor quality of even one service may affect the quality of services in other departments, e.g. poor quality of house keeping services (HK) may affect the quality of services in all other departments of the hospital by unclean, unhygienic environment, spreading infections and displeasing the patients, visitors as well as staff.
3. It is a continuous ongoing process involving implementation and repeated cycles of review and corrections.

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4. Staff at all levels has to be trained, involved and committed to quality management.
5. There are no shortcuts. The program can not be implanted in an organization. It has to be planned, documented (organization specific), and implemented by the organization with full knowledge, training, acceptance and participation of the staff.
6. Since it involves a major change in the ways of working, attitudes, in fact the entire work culture in the organization, it is likely to cause a lot of resistance and resentment among staff. The change has to be brought about in a way that is acceptable to the people.
7. Hiring an outside consultant has other advantages also. In-house administrators may not have adequate knowledge or skills to implement the program successfully. Being an expert on the subject, a professional consultant can guide the process so as to complete it with all the speed and efficiency.
8. Board of management has a crucial role. Not only they have to be convinced and committed themselves, they have to influence all the senior professionals to extend their full cooperation and willing participation and share the responsibility for successful implementation of the program.
9. The program must follow a time schedule meticulously. Any slackness at any stage is likely to send a wrong signal to the staff and break the momentum. Any delay has the potential to cause further delays and danger of cynical employees reverting to the old ways thereby derailing the entire program. It is also important because of the employee turnover factor.

Improvement of Quality in Healthcare : Different Approaches:

Total Quality Management (TQM)

TQM is a management approach of an organization, centered on quality, based on participation of all its members and aiming at long term success through customer satisfaction. The concept has replaced the traditional view of quality control, by strategic commitment to defect prevention, continuous process improvement and a system driven by needs of the customers. It is not just improving the quality, it is about customer satisfaction. TQM approach seeks to integrate all the resources and functions with the aim of a unified thrust focused at meeting the customers' need and organisation's objectives.

TQM has as much application in hospitals as in any other business or industry and can be used by a hospital as an approach to implementing a quality management program even while pursuing a program of certification or accreditation.

Lean Thinking (Lean Manufacturing)

Lean aims at customer focus- defining and increasing value to the customer. It means smooth process flow, doing only those activities that add customer value and eliminating all other activities that don't. Elimination of waste of resources (time, manpower, machines, materials) in every area and every stage is at the core of lean.

Basic Steps in Implementing Lean Operations

1. Define the value in the eyes of the customer.
2. Identify the activities that create value.
3. Identify the value stream, the sequence of activities.
4. Eliminate activities that do not add value.
5. Allow the customer to "pull" products/services (increasing demand) rather than pushing (by over production/supply).
6. Improve the process (start all over again).

5S System of Organization

This is an important tool in lean thinking. The idea is that a messy workplace, desk or manufacturing cell makes it hard to find things, easier to get distracted and can cause accidents or mistakes. The 5 Ss stand for :

- | | | | |
|----|--------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1. | Sort | : | Sort out needed and unneeded items. |
| 2. | Set in Order | : | Arrange things in their proper place. |
| 3. | Shine | : | Clean up the work place |
| 4. | Standardise | : | Standardise the first three S's |

5. Sustain : Make 5 S's a part of the job.

Lean thinking is very visual. It represents a state of mind. Clean, clear and focused at the task at hand and nothing else. It does not require any mathematical analysis unlike Six Sigma.

APPLICATION IN THE HOSPITAL SCENARIO

The concept of Lean can be applied to hospital scenario, too, with a lot of benefits as seen from the experience of Virtua Health, New Jersey, USA. Through the use of simple visual management tools they were able to achieve significant improvements in many ways such as:

1. Cleaning up the cluttered places in Accident & Emergency department as well as Operation Theatre by removing all the unused/unnecessary equipment/stores.
2. Redistributing the unused/idle equipment to other areas.
3. Freeing the space and making it easier for the staff as well as patients to move around with reduction of accident hazards for the patients as well as staff.
4. Reducing the inventory of stores and equipment by introducing "Just-in-time" concept.
5. Significant reduction of waiting time in the A & E department by simplifying the patients sign in process (registration).

ISO CERTIFICATION

ISO certification system, as discussed in detail later, is process based. It does not prescribe any standards of its own. The organization is expected to implement a system of quality management with documented policies and procedures covering all its activities and developing its own criteria and standards. The organizations having an effective quality management system and infrastructure for providing quality services as well as for continuous quality improvement, are issued ISO certification.

ACCREDITATION OF HOSPITALS

Accreditation means certification of quality of services by external agencies. It is a process in which an agency, separate from the healthcare (provider) organization, usually, but not necessarily non-governmental, assesses the health care organization to determine if it meets the set of standards considered essential (as laid down by the accrediting agency) to improve the quality of health care being rendered by the organization.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

In order to ensure maximum effectiveness:

1. The system must give adequate emphasis to all three aspects, i.e. the structure, Process and Outcome. However, it must be output oriented and process driven. The output in turn must justify the utilization of resources and must lead to the matching health benefits to the consumers.
2. Quality management system must be patient-focused. It must pass the essential criteria such as availability, accessibility, affordability, timeliness and must be need-based. The investigations/procedures must be as per the actual need and not guided by the defensive medicine approach.
3. A mechanism must be inbuilt where there is continuous monitoring/ checking of the various processes of health care delivery at every step so that the deficiencies/mistakes can be identified at the earliest so as to prevent them from passing on to the next page. For example, a common mistake is - wrong labeling of samples. If checked continuously, the mistake can be rectified right before the sample is sent to the lab. However, if not checked at that stage, it can lead to wrong lab reports wrong treatment by the treating physician and unfavorable outcome which may even mean the loss of life.
4. Staff at all levels in all departments must be fully trained and conversant with the protocols designed for every activity in their domain and must have the highest level of motivation and commitment to defect prevention so as to eliminate the mistakes and wasteful expenditure of resources.

CONCLUSION

For improvement of quality of health services what is important is implementation of a Quality

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Management System. Certification or accreditation by external agencies is not a must. However, in view of the vast marketing potential of external recognition (certification / accreditation, it is a sound strategy). For improvement of quality of its product/ service an organization can use one of the systems mentioned above. Each one of the approaches has proved it is implemented sincerely, correctly and as a continuous ongoing process.

Quality management in Health Care is a continuous process and not the end result. It is an ongoing pursuit of excellence through continuous process control at every step, with the total commitment of the top management, involvement of all staff and is aimed at providing to consumers, services of acceptable quality.

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