

# Unit Eight

## Quality improvement from a general practice employer perspective

### Key messages

Reading this unit will:

- describe the potential role of the health care assistant (HCA) in delivering quality improvement in the general practice
- describe quality improvement methods that you could use in your practice
- explain the importance of engaging patients in quality improvement.

The quality and outcomes framework (QOF)<sup>1</sup> is at the heart of the GMS Contract. General practice is best placed to manage chronic care and comorbidity in the community, with HCAs and practice nurses doing much of the routine work, leaving GPs available for more complex management work.

Financial reward depends on the team meeting evidence-based quality indicators in key clinical and organisational areas. General practices have achieved high clinical-quality scores in the initial year of the contract, which provided financial incentives for high-quality care from 2004.

Many of the improvements seen through the QOF have come from structured care provided by practice nurses and HCAs (see *Box: Improving quality*). Quality improvements cannot take place without good collaboration and communication between the team members in general practice and the wider NHS.

### Example: Improving quality

In one practice, the demands for recording activity for the QOF concentrated minds and stimulated team activity. With the help of their PCT, they arranged an away day at which they openly discussed new ways of working together. It was agreed that all staff were to have training on recording Read codes. The HCAs would have additional training on patient investigation and testing.

Structured protocols for the management of long-term conditions were revised and specific staff members allocated for certain pathways. Delegation to the HCAs increased, which allowed the practice nurses to have more time for managing long-term conditions and monitoring. The practice team found that much of what was required for the QOF was already in place, but was not being recorded sufficiently. As the HCAs gained in experience, they were able to improve the quality of the recording process for all the team.

Monitoring QOF criteria will help practices meet quality improvement standards and ensure appropriate delegation to HCAs in accordance with clinical governance. See [Tool – Monitoring service provision](#) for an example of service indicators that can be used to monitor the quality of a service.<sup>2</sup> Audit and significant event analysis must form part of regular team meetings, with examination, discussion and implementation of the necessary changes to meet any deficiencies identified as important (See [Tool – Structure, process and outcome as the three stages of undertaking audit; then judging how well you have performed the audit](#)).

## Quality improvement methods

A large number of quality initiatives have been introduced into general practice, some of which are outlined below.

### The Quality Team Development (QTD) Programme

The QTD Programme designed by the Royal College of General Practitioners is one of the most successful quality improvement methods (See [Tool – Quality Team Development – for practice teams](#)).

An evaluation of this programme<sup>3</sup> compares the characteristics of various quality improvement tools.

The programme is locally owned, and delivered with locally adaptable targets and standards. It has a team focus, is inter-professional, draws on personal influence and promotes inter-organisational collaboration. It is developmental and formative, rather than criterion referenced (although it contains criteria to work towards, some of which are derived from the Quality Practice Award and some from the QOF). QTD is led from within general practice, rather than externally – it is a reflective and developmental process that allows the practice to improve at its own pace.

The programme uses self assessment, patient questionnaires and peer review to enable practices to reflect on the quality of service they offer and on how well they work together as a team. This enables practice teams to identify areas of good practice, as well as areas for improvement. It also allows the identification of development priorities. The process is cyclical, with the practice self assessment, patient questionnaire, visit and development plan stages being repeated every 2–3 years.

### Quality Practice Assessment (QPA)

This programme is also developed by the Royal College of General Practitioners (See [Tool – Quality Practice Award](#)). It focuses on the practice team as a whole and recognises commitment from individuals in the multidisciplinary team.

### Total quality management

See [Tool – Quality tools from business – Total Quality Management](#) for information on this area.

### Investors in People

[Tool – Quality tools from business – Investors in People](#) gives information on how to maximise this area.

## Beacon practices

Although these have discontinued as a formal acknowledgement of innovative practice, those practices that were early adopters can help other practices who are in the process of developing protocols, guidelines, innovative services, etc (see Box: *Beacon award winners*).

### Example: Beacon award winners

Swanage Primary Care were proud to be among the first Beacon award-winners. The award was in recognition of the 'Health Visitor Surgery'.

The health visitor surgery was set up in 1997 for children with acute illness. It is run by health visitors and a children's nurse/district nursing sister. It offers:

- *a choice for parents on where to get advice*
- *an improved appointments system*
- *a consultation that can provide treatment, education, advice and/or health promotion*
- *an available GP for referral throughout the surgery time*
- *follow-up at home by the most appropriate member of the team*
- *a resource for the nurse-led minor injuries unit and local pharmacist.*

The service provides a friendly environment, causing less anxiety for parents and the child. There is less waiting time for patients and reduced staff stress levels. The health visitor's surgery helps parents improve their knowledge about long-term conditions and, therefore, helps them manage their child's illness more effectively. This has, in turn, led to a decrease in prescribing, particularly of antibiotics.

## Collaboratives

These occur where multi-professional teams come together to improve services in a specific area with facilitators and experts (see *Unit 8: Quality improvement from a PCT's perspective*).

## Engaging patients

Using the seven pillars of clinical governance (see *Unit 8: Quality improvement*) can help in the recording of quality initiatives as they are introduced or monitored. Engaging patients in the process can also be useful. A patient newsletter or a participation group can help practices understand the patients' and publics' perspectives when it comes to improving quality. It is also important to publicise new initiatives undertaken by the practice to improve quality so that patients can feed back their opinions of the new activities.

### Summary

- *HCA's can help practices to deliver the QOF.*
- *The culture of quality improvement in the practice can be built upon through implementing a quality improvement method.*
- *There are a number of quality improvement methods that practices can employ and some of them are specifically tailored to general practice.*
- *The benefits of quality initiatives can be maximised by engaging patients in the process.*

## References

1. British Medical Association's General Practitioners Committee and the NHS Confederation. *Investing in General Practice: The new General Medical Services Contract*. London: British Medical Association; 2003. <http://www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/07/19/67/04071967.pdf>
2. Chambers R, Wakley G. *Clinical Audit in Primary Care*. Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing; 2005.
3. MacFarlane F, Greenhalgh T, Schofield T, Desombre T. *RCGP Quality Team Development Programme: an illuminative evaluation*. *Qual Saf Health Care* 2004; 13: 356–362. <http://qhc.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/13/5/356>