QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

How organisations contribute to improving the quality of healthcare

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Naomi Fulop and Angus Ramsay argue that we should focus more on how organisations and organisational leaders can contribute to improving the quality of healthcare

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Key messages

- The contribution of healthcare organisations to improving quality is not fully understood or considered sufficiently
- Organisations can facilitate improvement by developing and implementing an organisation-wide strategy for improving quality
- Organisational leaders need to support system-wide staff engagement in improvement activity and, where necessary, challenge professional interests and resistance
- Leaders need to be outward facing, to learn from others, and to manage external influences. Strong clinical representation and challenge from independent voices are key components of effective leadership for improving quality
- Regulators can facilitate healthcare organisations’ contribution by minimising regulatory overload and contradictory demands

Improving the quality of healthcare is complex. Frontline staff are often seen as the key to improving quality—for instance, by identifying where it can be improved and developing creative solutions. However, research and reviews of major healthcare scandals acknowledge the contributions of other stakeholders in improving quality, including regulators, policy makers, service users, and organisations providing healthcare.

Policies on the role of organisations in improving quality have tended to focus on how they might be better structured or regulated. However, greater consideration is required of how organisations and their leaders can contribute to improving quality: organisations vary in both how they act to support improvement and the degree to which they provide high quality healthcare.

Some earlier studies suggest that high performing organisations share several features reflecting organisational commitment to improving quality. These include creating a supportive culture, building an appropriate infrastructure, and embedding systems for education and training. Subsequent reviews of quality inspections and reviews of evidence on factors influencing quality improvement indicate that organisational leadership is crucial in delivering high quality care.

We discuss how organisational processes such as development of a strategy and use of data can be used to drive improvement, the characteristics of organisations that are good at improvement, and what to consider when thinking about how organisations can help improve quality of healthcare and patient outcomes.

We present evidence on the role of organisations in improvement drawn from acute hospital settings in the UK and other countries. Although contexts may vary—for example, in whether health policy is made at regional or national level, or in the form and function of healthcare organisations—the lessons have potential relevance to all settings.

Placing healthcare organisations in their context

Health systems operate at three inter-related levels: macro, meso, and micro. Research suggests that organisations—through its leadership and processes—can bridge these levels to influence the quality of care delivered at the front line.

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A key macro influence on organisations performing their role in improving quality is the way the healthcare system is governed and regulated. Regulation provides accountability to the wider system and therefore has a potentially strong influence on how healthcare organisations approach improvement. For example, multiple regulators in healthcare systems, as is the case in England, can lead to “regulatory overload,” making it hard for organisations to focus on quality improvement rather than quality assurance because of the need to respond to different (and potentially conflicting) regulatory approaches, priorities, incentives, and sanctions.7 17 20

How can organisations contribute to improving quality?

Organisations can use various levers and processes to translate external inputs (such as policy and regulatory incentives) and internal inputs (such as local assurance systems providing data on performance and capacity) to support quality improvement.7 16 21 Organisations can facilitate improvement by developing and implementing an organisation-wide quality improvement strategy7 22 23 that includes the following actions:

- Using appropriate data to measure and monitor performance20 22
- Linking incentives (both carrot and stick) with performance on quality18 22
- Recruiting, developing, maintaining, and supporting a quality proficient workforce21
- Ensuring sufficient technical resources and building a culture that supports improvement.16

Many of the key organisational activities important to improving quality, such as setting strategy and agreeing performance measures, are defined at organisational level by the board.13 Bottom-up, clinician-led improvement is often seen as the answer to the quality challenge, and it is an important part of successful quality improvement.7 24 However, relying solely on frontline staff to lead improvement is risky because professional self interest can shape or limit the focus of improvement activity.22 25 26 Furthermore, lack of system-wide or organisation-wide agreement on objectives might result in variations at system level, reflecting localised priorities rather than what is likely to provide the best care for patients. As well as empowering staff and supporting system-wide staff engagement in activity around improving quality,20 organisational leaders must challenge localised professional interests, tribalism, and resistance to change.18 22

The reorganisation of acute stroke services in the UK (fig 1) shows how leadership can play a pivotal role in managing professional and organisational resistance to changes that aim to improve quality of care. Importantly in this case, leaders cited external organisations’ priorities and public consultation responses when holding the line against local resistance to change.25

The culture of organisations is commonly considered important in improving quality, as discussed elsewhere in this series.20 29 30 Although the relationship between culture and quality is complex, organisations can use formal and informal managerial processes to influence culture and thus improve quality of care.39

What helps organisations contribute to quality?

As set out in box 1, the relationship between a healthcare organisation and its external environment (especially regulators) is important in that organisation’s contribution to quality.16 23 A qualitative study of hospitals and their external environments in five European countries showed how some were better able to align multiple financial and quality demands. Figure 2 shows contrasting organisational responses to external demands and the features of both the external demands and the organisations that contributed to these different responses.

Organisations can also contribute to improving quality through participation in (or leading) major system change, working beyond their own catchment areas across their local system—for example, integrating health and social care services40 or centralising specialist acute services across multiple hospitals in a given area.12 23 Evidence suggests that how such changes are led and implemented influences the impact of the changes, including on patient outcomes (fig 1).

What do organisations that do well in improving quality look like?

Research suggests that organisations that deliver high quality care show high commitment to improving quality, reflected for instance in how organisations are led (eg, senior management involvement) and managed (eg, use of data and standards). As an illustration, fig 3 contrasts the approaches taken by US organisations with high patient mortality from acute myocardial infarction with those that have low mortality.

Some recent research has developed the concept of maturity in relation to how boards of organisations govern for quality improvement and what organisational processes accomplish and sustain it.18 More mature boards tend to use data to drive improvements in quality rather than merely for external assurance,18 20 and they combine hard quantitative data on performance with soft data on personal experiences to make the case for improvement.22 They also engage with relevant stakeholders (including patients16 and the public), translate this into strategic priorities,8 9 and have processes for managing and communicating information with stakeholders.8 9 18 They value learning and development7 22 34—for example, drawing on external examples of good practice to achieve initial improvement then focusing on local, creative problem solving for continued improvement.34

Box 1: Macro, meso, and micro contributions to the quality of healthcare

Macro (national health systems)
- Regulatory system
- Finance
- National priorities and policies
- Accreditation

Meso (hospitals)
- Strategies
- Systems
- Processes
- Cultures
- Practices
- Structures

Micro (departments, teams)
- Relational issues
- Communication
- Professional work
- Competence
Finally, these organisations are outward facing, engaging with and managing their wider environment, including payers and other provider organisations.\(^{13,22,34}\)

By contrast, organisations with lower levels of such capabilities (such as lack of coherent mission, high turnover of leadership, and poor external relationships) appear to slow or limit improvement.\(^{10,23,34}\) Some interventions have been identified to help organisations struggling to improve quality.\(^{39}\) Furthermore, research on organisational turnaround provides evidence of organisational leaders harnessing crisis, such as major safety issues or financial difficulties, to drive radical change and improvement.\(^{36,39}\) Key changes to turn round organisations have included refocused accountability systems (eg, making quality a key performance indicator, devolving accountability to clinical teams\(^{11,36,38}\)), introducing processes to facilitate improvement (eg, dedicated improvement roles,\(^{36,39}\) increased training opportunities, and sharing timely data on quality and cost with clinical teams\(^{11,36,38}\)), supporting culture change (eg, increasing collaboration between clinicians and management\(^{11,36,38}\) with clinicians leading on quality and management supporting them), and learning from the experience of other organisations.\(^{11,36,38}\)

However, for such interventions to have a chance of success, organisations need both sufficient space to think and the people to make change happen.\(^{31}\) The composition of senior leadership seems to influence how well organisations deliver on quality. Having clinicians on the board has been associated with better organisational performance.\(^{21,39}\)\(^{\text{39}}\) through enhanced decision making, increased credibility with local clinicians (facilitating frontline uptake of policy), and making organisations more likely to attract talented clinicians.\(^{39}\)

Active discussion of strategy is enhanced by independent challenge by non-executives who are well versed in clinical teams,\(^{11,36,38}\) introducing processes to facilitate improvement (eg, dedicated improvement roles,\(^{36,39}\) increased training opportunities, and sharing timely data on quality and cost with clinical teams\(^{11,36,38}\)), supporting culture change (eg, increasing collaboration between clinicians and management\(^{11,36,38}\) with clinicians leading on quality and management supporting them), and learning from the experience of other organisations.\(^{11,36,38}\)

How can we conclude?

Although organisations are central to improving quality, there is much variation in how they contribute, both locally and at system level. We have described ways in which organisations can contribute to improvement in terms of their processes (such as how they develop strategy and use data to drive improvements in quality), their leadership (such as how leaders engage with and manage both their external context and local professional interests), and underlying features (including coherence of external demands and leadership stability). Box 2 summarises these themes. However, the balance of priorities among these is unclear: organisations will want to analyse how they can maximise their contribution to improving quality taking account of their particular context.

### Box 2: What helps organisations contribute to quality?

#### Organisational process

- An organisation-wide quality strategy to shift from external assurance to prioritising improvement
- Combine hard and soft data to drive quality
- Engage and communicate with stakeholders, including patients and carers, staff, and external partners
- Build culture of trust, supporting innovation and problem solving

#### Organisational leadership

- Support system-wide staff engagement in improving quality
- Be outward facing, to learn from and manage external context
- Challenge local professional interests where necessary
- Feature a strong clinical voice and independent challenge, especially on the board

#### Underlying features

- Space to think about improving quality
- Resources to implement improvements
- Coherent external requirements: avoid regulatory overload and contradictory demands
- Stability of leadership

Regulators and policy makers also need to consider how they can better facilitate healthcare organisations’ role in improving quality. Organisations are more likely to deliver quality improvement effectively if externally set objectives are clear and manageable, and there is time and resources with which to meet these. Regulators should seek to avoid generating regulatory overload and contradictory demands; and they should strengthen organisational leadership’s hand by giving them headspace to look beyond compliance and prioritise improving quality.

Competing interests: We have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and declare that NJF is an NIHR senior investigator and was in part supported by the NIHR Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRC) North Thames at Barts Health NHS Trust. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR, or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Contributors and sources: Both authors made substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work; to the acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data; and to drafting the work and revising it critically for important intellectual content. NJF is the guarantor.

This article is part of a series commissioned by The BMJ based on ideas generated by a joint editorial group with members from the Health Foundation and The BMJ including a patient/carer. The BMJ retained full editorial control over external peer review, editing, and publication. Open access fees and The BMJ’s quality improvement editor post are funded by the Health Foundation.
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Figures

**Leadership**
Combine bottom-up clinical leadership with top-down regional authority

- Bottom up
- Top down

- Clinicians led development of meaningful clinical standards: "what good looks like"
- Ensured all stakeholders, such as provider and payer organisations, were involved throughout process

- Ensured clinical commitment and system-wide ownership of changes
- Enabled leaders to challenge local professional and managerial resistance to change

**Leadership and implementation approaches interlinked**

**Implementation**
Contributions of launch, standards, and facilitation

- Launch
- Standards
- Facilitation

- Single launch date gave clarity on when system went online
- System wide use of quality standards linked to financial incentives supported consistent delivery of care
- Operational support from local networks vital in facilitating timely implementation

**Combined effect:**
- Higher proportion of patients treated in specialist unit
- Higher likelihood of receiving evidence based care
- Significant reductions in patient mortality (eg. 96 additional lives saved a year in London) and length of hospital stay

*Fig 1 Leading and implementing system-wide change across organisations: centralising acute stroke services in London and Greater Manchester*
**Fig 2** How hospitals respond to external finance and quality demands

- **Response to external demands**
  - Immediate cost saving measures
  - Medium term strategies where quality and reducing costs not aligned
  - Medium term strategies where quality and financial goals aligned
  - Longer term (at least three years) strategy

- **Characteristics**
  - Management prioritises financial targets over quality (unless quality targets were linked to financial incentives)
  - Lower investment in quality - training cuts, cancelling study leave, and vacancies frozen, resulting in no time for staff to focus on improvement
  - Organisations struggled to prioritise between multiple quality demands
  - Staff became overloaded in trying to meet these demands
  - Proposals for redesign were met with resistance (perceived as cost cutting)
  - Staff associated service redesign with increases in quality
  - Organisations worked with external bodies to negotiate meaningful objectives balancing finance and improving quality
  - Focus on embedding quality and financial objectives in day to day activity
  - Organisations invested in developing a capable quality workforce
  - Ongoing dialogue with external bodies to ensure quality and finance objectives aligned

- **Underlying features**
  - Less likely
  - Coherence of external demands
  - Management capability to align demands
  - Leadership stability
  - More likely

**Fig 3** Contrasting organisational approaches in US healthcare organisations with the top and bottom 5% risk standardised mortality for acute myocardial infarction in 2017

- **TOP 5% HOSPITALS**
  - Risk standardised mortality rate: 11.4 to 14.0
  - Common vision: improving quality "the glue"; focus on aligning quality and financial objectives
  - High commitment; use of quality data to guide strategy and accountability; suitable financial and other resources for quality
  - High qualification standards; physician champions; empowered nursing staff; pharmacists integrated into care process
  - Staff with shared commitment to communication and seamless transitions in care; recognised interdependencies
  - Adverse events used to learn and improve; data incorporated into organisation; non-punitive culture; outward focused
  - No association with high or low performance

- **FEATURE**
  - Organisational values and goals
  - Senior management involvement
  - Staff presence/expertise
  - Communication and coordination between groups
  - Problem solving and learning
  - Protocols and processes for acute myocardial infarction care

- **BOTTOM 5% HOSPITALS**
  - Risk standardised mortality rate: 17.9 to 20.9
  - Meeting targets, "checking boxes"
  - High senior turnover; insufficient resources; intermittent use of data; feedback not reliably used to plan improving quality
  - Weak physician presence in quality; nurses not valued reliably; pharmacists had limited involvement in decision making
  - Constrained information flow (regular meetings, inefficient IT); inadequate transparency; staff felt isolated
  - Innovation not encouraged; challenging to get buy-in; inadequate focus on learning from elsewhere
  - No association with high or low performance