

What is quality
and how can it
be improved?

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What is quality?

Within health care, there is no universally accepted definition of ‘quality’. However, the majority of health care systems around the world have made a commitment to the people using and funding their services to monitor and continuously improve the quality of care they provide.

In England, the NHS is ‘organising itself around a single definition of quality’²: care that is effective, safe and provides as positive an experience as possible by being caring, responsive and person-centred. This definition also states that care should also be well-led, sustainable and equitable, achieved through providers and commissioners working together and in partnership with, and for, local people and communities (see Box 1). Health care systems across the UK are also looking at the environmental impact of the services they provide as part of their efforts to improve care quality.

Box 1: The dimensions of quality

For people who use services

Safe Avoiding harm to people from care that is intended to help them.

Effective Providing services based on evidence that produce a clear benefit.

Experience

- Caring. Staff involve and treat people with compassion, dignity and respect.
- Responsive and person-centred. Services respond to people's needs and choices and enable them to be equal partners in their own care.

For those providing services

Well-led They are open and collaborate internally and externally and are committed to learning and improvement.

Sustainable They use their resources responsibly and efficiently, providing fair access to all, and according to need of their populations.

Equitable They provide care that does not vary in quality because of a person's characteristics.

It is important that health care organisations consider all these dimensions when setting their priorities for improvement. Often the dimensions are complementary and work together. However, there can sometimes be tensions between them that will need to be balanced. It is therefore necessary to consider all stakeholders' views and to work together to identify improvement priorities for an organisation or local health care system.

How can we improve quality?

A long-term, integrated whole-system approach is needed to ensure sustained improvements in health care quality. Several factors (also discussed in Sections 3 and 5) are required to drive and embed improvements in a health care organisation or system.³⁻⁸

Leadership and governance

- Establishing effective leadership for improvement.
- Creating governance arrangements and processes to identify quality issues that require investigation and improvement.

- Adopting a consistent, aligned and systematic approach to improving quality.
- Developing systems to identify and implement new evidence-based interventions, innovations and technologies, with the ability to adapt these to local context.

Improvement culture, behaviours and skills

- Building improvement skills and knowledge at every level, from the top tiers of organisations, such as the boards of acute trusts or primary care networks, through to front-line staff.
- Recognising the importance of creating a workplace culture that is conducive to improvement.
- Giving everyone a voice and bringing staff, patients and service users together to improve and redesign the way that care is provided.
- Flattening hierarchies and ensuring that all staff have the time, space, permission, encouragement and skills to collaborate on planning and delivering improvement.

External environment

- Policy and regulatory bodies supporting efforts to develop whole-system approaches to improvement.
- Government ensuring that health and care services are appropriately resourced to deliver an agreed standard of quality.

What does quality improvement involve?

Quality improvement draws on a wide variety of approaches and methods, although many share underlying principles, including:

- identifying the quality issue
- understanding the problem from a range of perspectives, with a particular emphasis on using and interpreting data
- developing a theory of change
- identifying and testing potential solutions; using data to measure the impact of each test and gradually refining the solution to the problem

- implementing the solution and ensuring that the intervention is sustained as part of standard practice.

The successful implementation of the intervention will depend on the context of the system or the organisation making the change and requires careful consideration. It is important to create the right conditions for improvement and these include the backing of senior leaders, supportive and engaged colleagues and patients, and access to appropriate resources and skills.