

# The Business Role of Healthcare Quality Professionals



Daniel H. van Leeuwen

Six months ago *JHQ's* editor in chief asked me to write a guest editorial making the business case for quality. As healthcare quality professionals, we are well aware of the current situation:

- The economic burden of errors falls to patients, communities, and providers.
- Payment methods include built-in disincentives to make long-term investments in quality improvement.
- Transparency and scrutiny of quality indicator data by the public and payers are necessary.
- Clinicians and patients need real-time information at their fingertips.
- The increasing expense of treatment interventions is met with decreasing payment from payers.
- It is necessary to maximize the capture of revenue.
- Maintaining an adequate, competent, productive workforce poses challenges.

Healthcare quality professionals actively adjust and focus their roles within their organizations in order to have the greatest business impact. Let's posit that healthcare quality professionals help leaders rapidly and effectively adapt fiscal, business, and clinical processes in their effort to effectively manage an ever-changing and demanding environment. The critical functions of healthcare management support services include

- strategic planning
- the alignment of culture, structure, staff, and information systems to support quality
- implementation of a change management model
- development of a data warehouse for researching best practices and state-of-the-art protocols
- creation of user-friendly communication
- data, data management, and analysis.

Along with this toolbox, let's consider the menu of possibilities in the business role of healthcare quality professionals.

**Finance Department.** Partner with the finance department. Many healthcare quality professionals come from the clinical world and have little understanding of finance—some even have the attitude “leave the billing to the billing department.” Both finance and quality

management (QM) departments furnish support services to clinical operations by providing pulse-taking for the organization. Pulse-taking without selective intervention leaves only ink on paper. Take every opportunity to partner with members of the finance staff—learn their language, and learn their priorities. Those priorities might include revenue capture, Charge Master data cleanup and charging process improvement, supply chain management, return on investment calculation, and staff productivity. Members of the finance staff can point out the business opportunities, and the QM department can serve operations leaders from their slate of business and clinical process improvement skills.

**Data Quality.** Host collaborations to improve data quality, including strategic partnerships with health information management services (HIMS) and the medical records department. Data quality is fundamentally an operations challenge—QM and HIMS can host collaborations to clarify operational definitions, lead managers to design flow processes that include points of data entry, and conduct routine data cleansing analyses. Healthcare quality managers can actively facilitate the prioritization of initiatives, narrow the focus of action, and drive improvement using grade B data when necessary. As we all know, data quality improves with data use. We need to design no-blame systems that allow quick reporting, trend identification, and resolution of errors.

**Physician Relations.** Champion physician integration. Facilitate the design of systems that take services to physicians, remove non-value-added steps in their patient care processes, and provide real-time feedback about adherence to best practices. Identify and advocate for physician champions.

**Public Policy.** Directly lobby payers and business leaders using networks that span provider types. Often healthcare quality professionals leave lobbying for change in the alignment of financial and quality incentives to board members, executive staff, and trade

*continued on page 30*

### Authors' Biographies

*Etienne E. Pracht, PhD, is an assistant professor in the department of health policy and management at the College of Public Health, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL.*

*Barbara Languard-Orban, PhD, is an associate professor in the department of health policy and management at*

*the College of Public Health, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL.*

*For more information on this article, contact Etienne Pracht at [epracht@hsc.usf.edu](mailto:epracht@hsc.usf.edu).*

## The Business Role of Healthcare Quality Professionals

*continued from page 2*

associations. Instead, we could use our skills in best-practice research and presentation development to lobby directly or support those actively lobbying for positive changes in healthcare.

**Facility Improvements.** For those in healthcare organizations that are planning facility improvements, it is helpful to add the dimension of space and ergonomics to work-process redesign. Professionals with process-redesign skills can team with operations leaders, front-line staff, and architects to promote efficient and safe patient care delivery in the new facility. In turn, healthcare quality professionals can further use the participating frontline staff in future improvement initiatives, building on this expanding experience.

**Point-of-Care Data.** Lead the drive for making increased data available concurrently to multiple users at the point of care and service. This provides patients, caregivers, and service providers with real-time feedback about key evidence-based processes and adherence to practice guidelines that positively influence outcomes. The feedback informs efforts in patient care and service and ongoing interdisciplinary planning. Often information technology (IT) implementation resources focus almost solely on developing data dictionaries, interfaces, conversions, and processes for putting clinical data *in* the system. Healthcare quality professionals can emulate finance and billing by keeping the spotlight on getting the information *out*.

**Organizational Integration.** Healthcare quality professionals are integration specialists. Operations managers tend to maximize the excellence of their domains. Departmental excellence doesn't always lead naturally to

organizational excellence. Connect the dots for clinicians and managers, who often don't know the data that are available across silos or common functions and issues. Translate between silos—between clinical staff, management, and IT. Help standardize processes and maximize the user-friendliness of reports and analyses. Help clinician leaders use data for care and service planning. Assist clinical leaders by providing unbiased evaluations of drugs and devices.

Healthcare quality professionals, the business case for quality has been established. Expand your role as consultant, coach, operations analyst, and organizational development consultant. Expand your foci to include all facets of transforming the patient, physician, and staff experience. Being proactive in organizational change will extend your effectiveness, value, and personal satisfaction.

### Additional Reading

Institute of Medicine, Committee on Quality of Health Care in America. (2000). *To err is human: Building a safer health system* (L. T. Kohn, J. M. Corrigan, & M. S. Donaldson, Eds.). Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Casalino, L. P. (2003). Markets and medicine: Barriers to creating a "business case for quality." *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 46(1), 38–51.

Pelletier, L. R., & Beaudin, C. L. (Eds.). (2005). *Q solutions: Essential resources for the healthcare quality professional*. Glenview, IL: National Association for Healthcare Quality.

*Daniel H. van Leeuwen, MPH RN CPHQ, is a manager in information technology at St. Peter's Hospital in Albany, NY, and has more than 30 years' experience in healthcare delivery, management, and research. He is coeditor of the Journal for Healthcare Quality Quality Network column and was a contributing author of Q Solutions: Essential Resources for the Healthcare Quality Professional.*