Is there a relationship between quality improvement activities and ethics in today’s healthcare organizations?

The focus on the quality of healthcare has grown dramatically throughout the past decade. Though respondents to ACHE’s annual Top Issues Confronting Hospitals survey continue to identify financial issues as the uppermost issue for CEOs, concerns related to quality and patient safety continue to gain prominence. In 2007, quality was noted as a top concern by 33 percent of respondents, increasing from 23 percent in 2005. Similarly, patient safety’s placement as a top issue among the healthcare executives surveyed rose to 29 percent in 2007 from 20 percent in 2005.

Quality and safety of care is an expectation of all patients and is typically a prominent part of a healthcare facility’s mission statement. Patients also expect that the delivery of their care will be ethical, and this is often described in a healthcare organization’s value statement and code of ethics. We suggest that the expectation for and the goal of delivering ethical and quality care reflect a strong and interdependent linkage between the two concepts. Quality care is built on ethical standards and principles, and ethical practices foster quality care—the two cannot be separated. Just as quality and ethics are linked, so should healthcare programs and quality improvement efforts. This interdependent relationship between ethics and quality can be seen in several ways.

Quality care is a patient expectation and a responsibility of clinicians and executives in today’s healthcare organizations. Adhering to these principles and organizational values is required to ensure quality care and patient safety. It is an organization’s mandate, just as it is clinicians’ and executives’ professional responsibility, to ensure that quality care is achieved in all patient encounters. Therefore, ethics is the driver behind the goal of quality healthcare.

Ethics is the foundation for the defining dimensions of quality care. The Institute of Medicine’s report, *Crossing the Quality Chasm: A New Health System for the 21st Century*, describes the key dimensions of care that need improvement. Care should be: safe, effective, patient-centered, timely, efficient and equitable. These requisites of quality care are not only synergistic with ethics, but ethical concepts and reasoning are the foundation behind most current definitions of healthcare quality. For example, a patient-centered approach to healthcare means providing a respectful adherence to the patient’s preferences and values through a shared decision-making process. Such an approach is based on the ethical principles of autonomy and self-determination and is delineated in most healthcare organizations’ ethical standards of practice, an informed consent policy.
Equity, another aspect of quality care, reflects an ethical understanding that all patients should receive quality care regardless of their personal characteristics such as gender, geographic location (e.g., a large, urban facility versus a small, rural facility) or socioeconomic status. Equity is based on the ethics concepts of distributive justice and fairness.

**Quality improvement efforts should reflect ethical standards.**

During the past decade there has been significant focus on strategies to improve quality and safety of patient care and help the facility attain the key dimensions of quality. Just as clinical care and research should meet ethical standards, so should quality improvement efforts. Ethical concerns can arise when quality improvement activities cause harm or use resources inappropriately.

When a quality improvement effort is considered research, the activity will need to be reviewed according to federal regulations to ensure ethical standards are addressed. Participating patients will likely need to consent to such a research quality improvement effort. Even in situations where the quality improvement effort does not involve human subjects’ research, such as a data-gathering activity, the activity should be undertaken in accordance with ethical standards.

Some of the specific ethical standards that have been proposed for all quality improvement activities include: social or scientific value from the quality improvement activity; scientifically valid methodology; fair participant selection to achieve a fair distribution of burdens and benefits; favorable risk-benefit, limiting risks and maximizing benefits; respect for participants by respecting privacy and confidentiality; informed consent in minimal risk quality improvement activities as part of a patient’s consent for treatment; and independent review of the ethical conduct and accountability of the quality improvement activity (Lynn, J., et. al. “The Ethics of Using Quality Improvement Methods in Health Care.” *Annals of Internal Medicine.* Vol. 146, Issue 9: 666-673. 2007).

Healthcare executives, in collaboration with quality improvement officers and clinical and ethics leadership, should develop a system-oriented approach and process that ensures quality improvement activities are planned and implemented in accordance with ethical standards. Ethics committees can potentially serve not only as resources to clinicians and executives planning and implementing quality improvement programs, they also can foster such efforts.

For example, an ethics committee could develop a systemwide program to ensure that a greater number of patients have documented discussions regarding end-of-life decisions. The program could include quality improvement measures to assess compliance and an increase in advance care documents. This effort would further the ethical principle of patient self-determination and the patient-centered dimension of quality care and efficiency by decreasing unwanted treatments.

Quality care is a patient expectation and a responsibility of clinicians and executives in today’s healthcare organizations. Understanding the relationship between quality and ethics can strengthen efforts to provide safe, high-quality care in an ethical manner. Such an understanding will allow for providers and executives to see the synergy between quality improvement efforts and ethics initiatives. Ethics is both the foundation for quality healthcare and a driver for achieving the desired result—quality healthcare. ▲

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