Quality improvement into practice

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What you need to know

- Thinking of quality improvement (QI) as a principle-based approach to change provides greater clarity about (a) the contribution QI offers to staff and patients, (b) how to differentiate it from other approaches, (c) the benefits of using QI together with other change approaches
- QI is not a silver bullet for all changes required in healthcare: it has great potential to be used together with other change approaches, either concurrently (using audit to inform iterative tests of change) or consecutively (using QI to adapt published research to local context)
- As QI becomes established, opportunities for these collaborations will grow, to the benefit of patients.

How is quality improvement defined?

There are many definitions of QI (box 1). The BMJ’s Quality Improvement series uses the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges definition. Rather than viewing QI as a single method or set of tools, it can be more helpful to think of QI as based on a set of principles common to many of these definitions: a systematic continuous approach that aims to solve problems in healthcare, improve service provision, and ultimately provide better outcomes for patients.

Box 1: Definitions of quality improvement

- Improvement in patient outcomes, system performance, and professional development that results from a combined, multidisciplinary approach in how change is delivered.
- The delivery of healthcare with improved outcomes and lower cost through continuous redesigning of work processes and systems.
- Using a systematic change method and strategies to improve patient experience and outcome.
- To make a difference to patients by improving safety, effectiveness, and experience of care by using understanding of our complex healthcare environment, applying a systematic approach, and designing, testing, and implementing changes using real time measurement for improvement.

In this article we discuss QI as an approach to improving healthcare that follows the principles outlined in box 2; this may be a useful reference to consider how particular methods or tools could be used as part of a QI approach.

How this article was made

AB and FO are both specialist quality improvement practitioners and have developed their expertise working in QI roles for a variety of UK healthcare organisations. The analysis presented here arose from AB and FO’s observations of the challenges faced when introducing QI, with healthcare providers often unable to distinguish between QI and other change approaches, making it difficult to understand what QI can do for them.

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What other approaches to improving healthcare are there?

Taking considered action to change healthcare for the better is not new, but QI as a distinct approach to improving healthcare is a relatively recent development. There are many well-established approaches to evaluating and making changes to healthcare services in use, and QI will only be adopted more widely if it offers a new perspective or an advantage over other approaches in certain situations.

A non-systematic literature scan identified the following other approaches for making change in healthcare: research, clinical audit, service evaluation, and clinical transformation. We also identified innovation as an important catalyst for change, but we did not consider it an approach to evaluating and changing healthcare services so much as a catch-all term for describing activities such as process mapping that can be used within a range of QI methodological approaches. NHS Scotland’s Quality Improvement Hub has a glossary of commonly used tools in QI.11

Emancipation of frontline staff and service users—QI work should engage staff and patients by providing them with the opportunity and skills to contribute to improvement work. Recognition of this need often manifests in drives from senior leadership or management to build QI capability in healthcare organisations, but it also requires that frontline staff and service users feel able to make use of these skills and take ownership of improvement work.12

Using data to drive improvement—To drive decision making by measuring the impact of tests of change over time and understanding variation in processes and outcomes. Measurement for improvement typically prioritises this narrative approach over concerns around exactness and completeness of data.11,14

Scale-up and spread, with adaptation to context—As interventions tested using a QI approach are scaled up and the degree of belief in their efficacy increases, it is desirable that they spread outward and be adopted by others. Key to successful diffusion of improvement is the adaption of interventions to new environments, patient and staff groups, available resources, and even personal preferences of healthcare providers in surrounding areas, again using an iterative testing approach.15,16

Why do we need to make this distinction for QI to succeed?

Improvement in healthcare is 20% technical and 80% human.27 Essential to that 80% is clear communication, clarity of approach, and a common language. Without this shared understanding of QI as a distinct approach to change, QI work risks straying from the core principles outlined above, making it less likely to succeed. If practitioners cannot communicate clearly with their colleagues about the key principles and differences of a QI approach, there will be mismatched expectations about what QI is and how it is used, lowering the chance that QI work will be effective in improving outcomes for patients.27

There is also a risk that the language of QI is adopted to describe change efforts regardless of their fidelity to a QI approach, either due to a lack of understanding of QI or a lack of intention to carry it out consistently.22 Poor fidelity to the core principles of QI reduces its effectiveness and makes its desired outcome less likely, leading to wasted effort by participants and decreasing its credibility.22,23 This in turn further widens the gap between advocates of QI and those inclined to scepticism, and may lead to missed opportunities to use QI more widely, consequently leading to variation in the quality of patient care.

Without articulating the differences between QI and other approaches, there is a risk of not being able to identify where a QI approach can best add value. Conversely, we might be tempted to see QI as a “silver bullet” for every healthcare challenge when a different approach may be more effective. In reality it is not clear that QI will be fit for purpose in tackling all of the wicked problems of healthcare delivery and we must be able to identify the right tool for the job in each situation.23 Finally, while different approaches will be better suited to different types of challenge, not having a clear understanding of how approaches differ and complement each other may mean missed opportunities for multi-pronged approaches to improving care.

What is the relationship between QI and other approaches such as audit?

Academic journals, healthcare providers, and “arms-length bodies” have made various attempts to distinguish between the different approaches to improving healthcare.19–28 However, most comparisons do not include QI or compare QI to only one or two of the other approaches.7,29–31 To make it easier for people to use QI approaches effectively and appropriately, we summarise the similarities, differences, and crossover between
QI and other approaches to tackling healthcare challenges (fig 1).

QI and research

Overview

Research aims to generate new generalisable knowledge, while QI typically involves a combination of generating new knowledge or implementing existing knowledge within a specific setting. Unlike research, including pragmatic research designed to test effectiveness of interventions in real life, QI does not aim to provide generalisable knowledge. In common with QI, research requires a consistent methodology. This method is typically used, however, to prove or disprove a fixed hypothesis rather than the adaptive hypotheses developed through the iterative testing of ideas typical of QI. Both research and QI are interested in the environment where work is conducted, though with different intentions: research aims to eliminate or at least reduce the impact of many variables to create generalisable knowledge, whereas QI seeks to understand what works best in a given context. The rigour of data collection and analysis required for research is much higher; in QI a criterion of “good enough” is often applied.

Relationship with QI

Though the goal of clinical research is to develop new knowledge that will lead to changes in practice, much has been written on the lag time between publication of research evidence and knowledge that will lead to changes in practice, much has been written. Though the goal of clinical research is to develop new knowledge, and QI typically involves a combination of generating new knowledge or implementing existing knowledge within a specific setting. Unlike research, including pragmatic research designed to test effectiveness of interventions in real life, QI does not aim to provide generalisable knowledge. In common with QI, research requires a consistent methodology. This method is typically used, however, to prove or disprove a fixed hypothesis rather than the adaptive hypotheses developed through the iterative testing of ideas typical of QI. Both research and QI are interested in the environment where work is conducted, though with different intentions: research aims to eliminate or at least reduce the impact of many variables to create generalisable knowledge, whereas QI seeks to understand what works best in a given context. The rigour of data collection and analysis required for research is much higher; in QI a criterion of “good enough” is often applied.

QI and clinical audit

Overview

Clinical audit is closely related to QI: it is often used with the intention of iteratively improving the standard of healthcare, albeit in relation to a pre-determined standard of best practice. When used iteratively, interspersed with improvement action, the clinical audit cycle adheres to many of the principles of QI. However, in practice clinical audit is often used by healthcare organisations as an assurance function, making it less likely to be carried out with a focus on empowering staff and service users to make changes to practice. Furthermore, academic reviews of audit programmes have shown audit to be an ineffective approach to improving quality due to a focus on data collection and analysis without a well developed approach to the action section of the audit cycle. Clinical audits, such as the National Clinical Audit Programme in the UK (NCAPOP), often focus on the management of specific clinical conditions. QI can focus on any part of service delivery and can take a more cross-cutting view which may identify issues and solutions that benefit multiple patient groups and pathways.

Relationship with QI

Audit is often the first step in a QI process and is used to identify improvement opportunities, particularly where compliance with known standards for high quality patient care needs to be improved. Audit can be used to establish a baseline and to analyse the impact of tests of change against the baseline. Also, once an improvement project is under way, audit may form part of rapid cycle evaluation, during the iterative testing phase, to understand the impact of the idea being tested. Regular clinical audit may be a useful assurance tool to help track whether improvements have been sustained over time.

Scenario: Audit and QI

A foundation year 2 (FY2) doctor is asked to complete an audit of a pre-surgical pathway by looking retrospectively through patient documentation. She concludes that adherence to best practice is mixed and recommends: “Remind the team of the importance of being thorough in this respect and re-audit in 6 months.” The results are presented at an audit meeting, but a re-audit one year later by a new FY2 doctor shows similar results.

Contrast the above with a team-led, rapid cycle audit in which everyone contributes to collecting and reviewing data from the previous week, discussed at a regular team meeting. Though surgical patients are often transient, their experience of care and ideas for improvement are captured during discharge conversations. The team identify and test several iterative changes to care processes. They document and test these changes against audits, leading to sustainable change. Some of the surgeons involved work across multiple hospitals, and spread some of the improvements, with the audit tool, as they go.

QI and service evaluation

Overview

In practice, service evaluation is not subject to the same rigorous definition or governance as research or clinical audit, meaning that there are inconsistencies in the methodology for carrying it out. While the primary intent for QI is to make change that will drive improvement, the primary intent for evaluation is to assess the performance of current patient care. Service evaluation may be carried out proactively to assess a service against its stated aims or to review the quality of patient care, or may be commissioned in response to serious patient harm or red flags about service performance. The purpose of service evaluation is to help local decision makers determine whether
a service is fit for purpose and, if necessary, identify areas for improvement.

Relationship with QI
Service evaluation may be used to initiate QI activity by identifying opportunities for change that would benefit from a QI approach. It may also evaluate the impact of changes made using QI, either during the work or after completion to assess sustainability of improvements made. Though likely planned as separate activities, service evaluation and QI may overlap and inform each other as they both develop. Service evaluation may also make a judgment about a service’s readiness for change and identify any barriers to, or prerequisites for, carrying out QI.

QI and clinical transformation

Overview
Clinical transformation involves radical, dramatic, and irreversible change—the sort of change that cannot be achieved through continuous improvement alone. As with service evaluation, there is no consensus on what clinical transformation entails, and it may be best thought of as an umbrella term for the large scale reform or redesign of clinical services and the non-clinical services that support them. While it is possible to carry out transformation activity that uses elements of QI approach, such as effective engagement of the staff and patients involved, QI which rests on iterative test of change cannot have a transformational approach—that is, one-off, irreversible change.

Relationship with QI
There is opportunity to use QI to identify and test ideas before full scale clinical transformation is implemented. This has the benefit of engaging staff and patients in the clinical transformation process and increasing the degree of belief that clinical transformation will be effective or beneficial. Transformation activity, once completed, could be followed up with QI activity to drive continuous improvement of the new process or allow adoption of new ways of working. As interventions made using QI are scaled up and spread, the line between QI and transformation may seem to blur. The shift from QI to transformation occurs when the intention of the work shifts away from continuous testing and adaptation into the wholesale implementation of an agreed solution.

Scenario: QI and clinical transformation

An NHS trust’s human resources (HR) team is struggling to manage its junior doctor placements, rotas, and on-call duties, which is causing tension and has led to concern about medical cover and patient safety out of hours. A neighbouring trust has launched a smartphone app that supports clinicians and HR colleagues to manage these processes with the great success.

This problem feels ripe for a transformation approach—to launch the app across the trust, confident that it will solve the trust’s problems.

Before continuing reading think about your own organisation—What do you think will happen, and how would you use the QI principles described in this article for this situation?

Outcome without QI
Unfortunately, the HR team haven’t taken the time to understand the underlying problems with their current system, which revolve around poor communication and clarity from the HR team, based on not knowing who to contact and being unable to answer questions. HR assume that because the app has been a success elsewhere, it will work here as well.

People get excited about the new app and the benefits it will bring, but no consideration is given to the processes and relationships that need to be in place to make it work. The app is launched with a high profile campaign and adoption is high, but the same issues continue. The HR team are confused as to why things didn’t work.

Outcome with QI
Although the app has worked elsewhere, rolling it out without adapting it to local context is a risk—one which application of QI principles can mitigate.

HR pilot the app in a volunteer specialty after spending time speaking to clinicians to better understand their needs. They carry out several tests of change, ironing out issues with the process as they go, using issues logged and clinician feedback as a source of data. When they are confident the app works for them, they expand out to a directorate, a division, and finally the transformational step of an organisation-wide rollout can be taken.

Education into practice

Next time when faced with what looks like a quality improvement (QI) opportunity, consider asking:

• How do you know that QI is the best approach to this situation? What else might be appropriate?
• Have you considered how to ensure you implement QI according to the principles described above?
• Is there opportunity to use other approaches in tandem with QI for a more effective result?

How patients were involved in the creation of this article

This article was conceived and developed in response to conversations with clinicians and patients working together on co-produced quality improvement and research projects in a large UK hospital. The first iteration of the article was reviewed by an expert patient, and, in response to their feedback, we have sought to make clearer the link between understanding the issues raised and better patient care.

Contributors: This work was initially conceived by AB, AB and FO were responsible for the research and drafting of the article. AB is the guarantor of the article.

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Figure

Clinical audit
“A way to find out if healthcare is being provided in line with standards and let care providers and patients know where their service is doing well, and where there could be improvements” (NHS England 2018)
Provides assurance that we are adhering to best practice, identifies shortfalls in practice, and suggests corrective actions
Use audit to provide assurance or improve the extent to which best practice is being followed
Clinical audit may identify areas of non-compliance with best practice that would benefit from a QI approach

Quality improvement (QI)
A principle-based approach to continuously improving aspects of healthcare with a focus on iterative change, learning, and adaptation
QI seeks to engage staff and patients to change culture as well as processes and systems
Change using QI can be adapted and spread across teams and organisations
Use Quality Improvement to make small changes that will have a big impact

Research
“The attempt to derive generalisable new knowledge by addressing clearly defined questions with systematic and rigorous methods” (Department of Health 2005)
It starts from a hypothesis which is tested and measured using a rigorous scientific approach
Research requires careful planning and often funding and ethical approval to proceed
Use research to derive generalisable new knowledge to drive clinical care forward

Service evaluation
“A process of investigating the effectiveness or efficiency of a service with the purpose of generating information for local decision making about the service” (Healthcare Quality Improvement Partnership 2011)
Service evaluation is broad and may consider financial sustainability and workforce planning in addition to quality of service provided
Use service evaluation to take a snapshot of how a service is performing

Use audit to provide assurance or improve the extent to which best practice is being followed

Upskilling staff in QI as part of a transformation project provides them with the skills to problem solve or tweak things after a large change has been completed

Clinical transformation
“A deliberate, planned process that sets out a high aspiration to make dramatic and irreversible changes to how care is delivered” (Health Foundation 2015)
It may be driven by clinical need, the need to modernise, or by external demands. May involve consultation with staff and partners
Use a transformation approach when large scale change is required

Fig 1 How quality improvement interacts with other approaches to improving healthcare