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Quality Improvement in Public Health: Current Status and Future Prospects

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ABSTRACT

The application of quality improvement (QI) methods and techniques in public health departments has accelerated rapidly over the last decade catalyzed by the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) with extensive support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Quality improvement is a distinct management process that deploys a coordinated set of techniques to assist departments in meeting the health needs of their communities.

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QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN PUBLIC HEALTH

The application of quality improvement (QI) methods and techniques in public health departments has accelerated rapidly over the last decade, catalyzed by the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) with extensive support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). QI in public health is defined as an activity that: (1) involves a distinct process with a specific beginning and end, (2) applies precise techniques designed to improve the process, (3) focuses on activities that are responsive to community needs, and (4) is a continuous effort to achieve measurable improvements in performance which achieves equity and improves the population health.1,2 Less than 10 years ago, there was infrequent application of QI methods to public health settings, and the public health field had not developed a set of shared principles or a common definition for quality improvement. The adoption of quality improvement by public health departments has spread rapidly and this commentary briefly reviews the current status of QI in public health as well as what may be coming in the future.

THE CURRENT STATUS OF QI METHODS AND TECHNIQUES IN PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENTS

The current practice and application of QI in public health has advanced due to several influences. The PHAB efforts to promulgate accreditation to state, local, Tribal, and territorial health departments have catalyzed a tremendous QI transformation. Quality improvement is an essential domain in the PHAB accreditation system, and accredited departments have shown a capacity (and in some cases advanced proficiency) to carry out meaningful quality improvement projects. QI is now incorporated into the processes of these departments, and they have demonstrated that QI is not additional work, it is part of their routine. Integrating QI into the PHAB accreditation program strengthens health department performance, reflects a transition from theory into everyday public health practice, and ultimately creates a pathway toward improved community health outcomes.3–6 Today, over 170 million people (55% of the population) are served by an accredited health department.7

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Quality improvement is a distinct management process that deploys a coordinated set of techniques to assist departments in meeting the health needs of their communities. Numerous reports consistently indicate that QI projects result in measurable improvement in organizational efficiency and effectiveness. The next step is to move QI from a series of discrete projects to a set of integrated undertakings with central organization coordination. This will lead to better overall organizational performance management that aims to integrate strategies, operations, and individual public health staff effort with a direct line of sight between the three performance components. Incorporating quality improvement methods and techniques into overall performance management is the next logical progression and will help to advance the Culture of Health priority by the RWJF to improve population health, wellbeing, and equity.8
REFERENCES


