

The Outcomes Challenge: Avoiding the Accountability Trap

White Paper
Prepared by Horizon Health Behavioral Health Services



CLINICAL EXCELLENCE IN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

“Many might have achieved success had they not supposed that they already possessed it.”

-anonymous

Do Your Patients Improve?

Ask providers and administrators to quantify the basic question, “*Do our patients improve?*” and watch the responses falter. This seemingly simple question is quickly becoming the most important in healthcare today.

The Trap

Many behavioral health programs believe that they have risen to the demand for evidence. In today’s behavioral health environment there appears to be a rush to measurement. Facilities caught up in this rush can get caught in an “accountability trap.”

In 1966, Avedis Donabedian proposed a 3-tiered flowchart to evaluate medical intervention.

Structure: The characteristics of a healthcare setting

Process: What is done to the patient

Outcomes: How the patient does after healthcare intervention

In an effort to move toward accountability, accreditors, payors and administrators have embraced *process* measures for public reporting, the driving theory being that improved processes lead to better outcomes. In fact, improved processes often lead to increased efficiency in process measurement, management, incentivized compliance, and little else. These measures are an excellent first step toward creating accountability, transparency, informed choice, and increased quality, but as one Harvard Business Review article so succinctly phrased it, “*Efforts to reform Healthcare have been hobbled by lack of clarity about the goal, or even by pursuit of the wrong goal.*”³

The Outcomes Challenge

Patients and payers are requesting results-oriented information, even as the science for national measures is still developing. The challenge to outcomes measurement is the complexity associated with understanding a good outcome versus a bad outcome, and the causes of each at a patient level.

Dr. Marty Makary reminds us in his book, “*Unaccountable: What Hospitals Won’t Tell You And How Transparency Can Revolutionize Health Care*”, that “*Modern medicine is not the standardized discipline most people think it is.*”¹ This sentiment is echoed in numerous publications about healthcare quality and behavioral health. The bad news is, “*there are substantial gaps between what science tells us to do and what we do in actual practice, despite the significant investment of public resources.*”²

Avoiding the Trap

Facilities must avoid the singular lure of these measures, and maintain clinical outcomes measurement as the best measure of quality of care. Facilities get caught in the accountability trap when:

- management loses sight of the ultimate goal in healthcare: *improved patient outcomes*;
- quality is defined solely around easily quantifiable, incentivized, risk reduction or payor-centric issues;

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- publicly-reported measures themselves become the goal;
- resources attributed to the publicly-reported measures outstrip the attention given to patient improvement; or
- a myopic focus reduces or eliminates the exploration for the better path.

Avoiding the accountability trap requires the application of big picture, transparent, benchmarked and publicly-reported clinical outcomes that address the reasons the patients came to the hospital in the first place—*to get better*.

A Practical Approach

Outcomes measurement needn't be unapproachable. While there is an emerging body of literature and support materials around Evidence Based Practices, many programs implement EBPs without maintaining fidelity to the practices they endorse, and payors and patients seeking evidence have little ability to ensure fidelity or evaluate the endorsed practice.

A practical approach for any hospital or hospital system is to select clinical severity measures that meet the clinical needs of the hospital's patient load and provide the hospital access to benchmarking or a shared pool of data for performance monitoring. When behavioral health leaders and providers narrowly focus on publicly-reported process measures, success in the measures become the target, and their facilities face the danger of losing sight of the true goal of healthcare quality: *Improved Patient Outcomes*.

Horizon Health is a 20-year veteran of promoting practical implementation of outcomes measurement in behavioral health programs. These clinical outcomes serve as a performance marker for our client hospitals.

Contact Horizon to find out how our outcomes measurement system enables our client hospitals to clearly measure the effectiveness of their psychiatric program's interventions in producing patient gains over the course of treatment and directly answers the core question in healthcare, "*Do our patients improve?*"

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- * Horizon's database comprises data on more than 450,000 patients from over 800 hospitals. Horizon's CQI+ outcomes measurement system is the leading private sector contributor to the HBIPS data set.

References:

- 1 – "Unaccountable: What Hospitals Won't Tell You And How Transparency Can Revolutionize Health Care." Bloomsbury Press, New York, (2012) Marty Makary, M.D.
- 2 – "Poor Practice, Managed Care and Magic Pills: Have We Created a Mental Health Monster?" Psychiatric Times, (2011) , Leo Bastiaens, MD .
- 3– "The Strategy That Will Fix Health Care." M. Porter & T.H. Lee. Harvard Business Review, October 2013 p.50.

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