

The Burning Platform: The Critical Role of the Board in Health Care Quality



Current topics such as health care equity, sustainability, and workforce wellness, all of which became even more evident during the pandemic, must be considered by the Board, as their impact on quality of care is significant.

The accountability of hospital boards regarding patient quality and safety is addressed by The Joint Commission and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) requirements, which state that leadership—specifically boards—is ultimately responsible for the quality and safety provided at their organizations (CMS refers to the board as the governing body). A health care organization’s governing body plays an important role in ensuring quality and safety. Evidence shows that the actions of the board have a significant impact on patient and staff outcomes: boards that prioritize quality have higher performance on selected clinical quality metrics (Jha, et al, 2010). However, governing bodies are not consistently, effectively, or regularly educated on quality or their role as it relates to quality and safety. Board members have self-identified their own lack of competency in quality and safety (Goeschel, et al, 2022; McGaffigan, et al., 2017).

Many boards have delegated quality to a board subcommittee, composed of board members and hospital leaders, where detailed information on quality and safety is discussed. Often this ‘quality committee of the board’ reports their meeting minutes to the full board as a consent agenda item, with little to no discussion. Therefore, the full board may not be aware of, nor take action on critical issues that affect patient quality and safety. In a 2010 study, fewer than half of the boards reviewed rated quality of care as one of their top priorities, and only a minority reported receiving training in quality (Curran & Totten, 2010). It is the responsibility of the full board to understand the organization’s performance in all areas of the organization, especially quality and safety.

For board members to be effective in their role in driving improvement across the organization, they should receive education about quality and safety. Board members come from various backgrounds and often their expertise is outside of the health care arena. Board member education on quality and safety needs to begin at the time of their orientation and continue on a regular basis to help them govern effectively. Research has shown that higher-performing health care organizations are correlated with well-educated boards that discuss and monitor quality and safety in measurable, meaningful ways at every board meeting (Vaughn, et al., 2014; Baker, et al., 2010).

Health care organizations continue to struggle to provide reliable, high-quality, safe care to those they serve. These gaps in performance put the organization at risk financially and can affect regulatory compliance and their reputation as well. Because board members are accountable for the quality of services provided to patients, data should be presented in such a way that they can clearly identify areas where the organization is performing well - or not. Unfortunately, studies show that only 71 percent of boards use metrics and objectives to evaluate performance (Curran & Totten, 2010; McGaffigan et al., 2017). Graphs or dashboards may be used as visual descriptions to illustrate whether the organization is meeting or not meeting its goals. These graphic displays can assist board members in identifying trends in performance over time.

Health care is a complex and dynamic system with many moving parts that interact and change frequently in response to scientific, clinical, technological, and societal advances. Boards must guide their organizations in new directions, and to do this, they must stay ahead of the curve by continually educating themselves on current and upcoming health care issues. The range of topics related to quality and safety is broad, including measurement systems, performance improvement methods, regulatory and accreditation requirements. Current topics such as health care equity, sustainability, and workforce wellness, all of which became even more evident during the pandemic, must be considered by the Board, as their impact on quality of care is significant. For organizations to achieve their goal of providing high quality care, Boards must be prepared so that they can provide leadership around

Summary:

The role of the board is critical in ensuring that high quality patient outcomes are first and foremost in an organization's culture. Health care organizations should capitalize on the expertise of their board, applying their knowledge to guide improvement in organizational performance. For board members to be effective, they need the knowledge, information and guidance on board processes that support quality and safety. The current state of health care boards was summarized by Baker:

“Each board has dealt with quality and safety from a different perspective. They are not using consistent indicators, they are not using a consistent approach, and they don't really understand what their role is.”

By providing resources and education on best practice processes, boards can successfully impact efforts to improve quality and patient safety across the world.

References

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