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Backgrounder

Public Reporting on the Quality of Healthcare: Emerging Evidence on Promising Practices for Effective Reporting

Public reporting of health system performance continues to gain prominence as an effective accountability technique in Canada and elsewhere. Its status has come as a result of its ability to respond to long-standing public expectations for transparency as well as policy and provider commitments to healthcare quality improvement. As shown by the debate about its potential intended and unintended consequences, public reporting on the quality of healthcare does not come without controversy. Despite this, the literature and the increasing number of public reporting initiatives have shown that public reporting is here to stay. For this reason, *Reporting on the Quality of Healthcare: Emerging Evidence on Promising Practices for Effective Reporting* explores not whether public reporting should be done, but rather *how* it can be done effectively.

Commissioned by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation, in partnership with the Ontario Health Quality Council, this research project aims to promote a better understanding of the evidence around effective strategies and promising practices for public reporting on the quality of healthcare. In this report, Wallace, Teare, Verrall and Chan provide a comprehensive review of the literature and results of key informant interviews, which aim to identify the key components of an effective public reporting program.

The authors conclude that there is no single "best" approach to reporting effectively. Rather, there are a number of factors to take into consideration to develop an effective reporting program. These include knowing the needs of the audience, clearly defining the reporting program's objective and cultivating the media to disseminate the right message.

Understanding that one size does not fit all when it comes to public reporting on quality of care, Wallace et al. suggest a framework that incorporates six components for developing a public reporting program:

- Objectives – Defining the objectives of a report is the most important step in the process. The literature and the report identify that organizations typically report for three reasons: to improve accountability, quality and/or consumer choice.
- Audience – The target audience is determined by the objectives of the reporting process and can vary depending on who is to be held accountable, how quality improvement can be addressed, or if consumer choice is the desired outcome.
- Report content – The content of a report should be informed by who the audience is and what is to be accomplished. For example, if the intended audience is policy and decision makers with a regional health authority, the content or indicators would be different than a report that is intended for clinical healthcare providers, such as nurses.
- Product – The final product should be presented in a way that is appropriate to and easily understood by the audience.
- Distribution – Reaching the target audience involves taking some weighted risks. For example, relying on passive channels of distribution – such as newspaper inserts, physician waiting rooms or libraries – imposes the risk of failure of the product reaching consumers of care. Meanwhile, other methods – such as engaging the news media to promote quality reporting – may get your product into consumers' hands but can take considerable effort and lead to delivery of messages that are sensationalized or misrepresented.
- Impact – While there is some evidence to suggest public reporting can lead to small improvements in the quality of care, there is no solid evidence of its impact on increasing or improving accountability in the health system. Full evaluations of the impact of reporting have been limited due to high costs.

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Improving healthcare quality begins with an open and honest acknowledgement of where things are going well and not so well. With that mindset, this report will act as a guide to effectively inform the stakeholders through reporting processes.

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