

“HEALING” THE ROMANIAN HEALTH CARE SYSTEM THROUGH THE TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT METHOD

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Abstract: *A country without a solid sanitary system is a loss both for patients and for employees who work in medical institutions. On the one hand, Romania is privileged to have well trained doctors as well as competent medical staff, who are always willing to help a patient in need; on the other side, Romania has also a poor health care system, that damages not only the clinics and hospitals, but also the desire of both patients and doctors to be treated and work in Romania.*

However, a change is imposed: assuring an efficient and well organized sanitary system, which will lead to more satisfied employees and in the end, to increased patient's satisfaction.

During times, an innovative method, a philosophy, was able to help and change industries in need, providing them with tools for perfecting their operating system, motivating the employees and concentrating on customer's needs.

Nowadays, this method is used with success and covers a large area of industries, including the sanitary industry. European hospitals have used this method in order to rearrange, from the quality's point of view, their departments and keep their customers and employees satisfied with the sanitary institution.

Total Quality Management is a method that has the ability to convert the health care system, and to cover all “gaps” formed for several years. Starting with correcting as much as possible all the issues found in the health care system, will lead to the top and most important objective: focusing on patient and assuring him a significant level of satisfaction.

The applicability of this method made is possible also for Romanian hospitals. Since our health care system is confronting daily with issues that affect the patients (some issues being even deadly), a change in the way the quality is perceived, is suitable for our hospitals and clinics.

Keywords: hospitals; quality management; patient; internal quality; external quality.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When referring to Romanian health care system, there are 2 kinds of reactions: on the one side, people revile the system, and on the other side, people prefer not to talk about it.

What is the main cause that determined these improper reactions and do we have a solution to reorganize people's thoughts?

Well, unfortunately, the Romanian health care system faces several deficiencies. From the long waiting time in front of the cabinets, to expensive medical procedures and old medical equipment, these all represent a huge gap in a European medical system.

In comparison with countries like France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, etc., Romanian medical system is cheaper, but the conditions and “adventures” that a patient has to pass

to get better, could made people think twice and chose to treat themselves in another European medical system.

Therefore, there must be a way in which our medical system could improve, and satisfy alike the medical staff and the patients.

Romania has a lot of high rank physicians, who learned and practiced in foreign countries and even so, they chose to return in Romania, to apply their knowledge in order to help the Romanian patients.

For the moment, one thing is for sure: we do have good physicians and specialists, we do have plenty of suffering patients and we do have a consistent number of clinics and hospitals. Summarizing that, all we need is a management that could gather the subjects together, and helping each one of them. Otherwise, patients will continue to blame the doctors for every imperfection that occurs and the discontent state will continue without any change.

An option to “heal” our hospitals is the Total Quality Management (TQM) method. This article aims to present the benefits and advantages of implementing TQM in Romanian hospitals.

The success of every industry is determined by the way the clients perceive the quality of the product or service for which he paid a certain amount of money. The consumer perception is the one that will determine the customer’s future will to consume services from a certain industry. Among several industries that use quality management in Romania, there is also the sanitary industry, a place where quality should occupy a significant level. In Romania’s hospitals, the appreciation of quality is determined by the patient. Every hospital must sustain an activity concentrated on patients’ needs, on satisfying these needs and even overcome them.

Along with the patients’ benefits, come also the hospital’s benefits, like increasing profit, increasing the share of satisfied clients, reducing costs, etc.

2. WHAT IS TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT?

The quality control through statistical methods appears at the beginning of the XX century, initiated by Shewart and continued by Deming and Juran, consisting in eliminating components that do not match standards.

The quality assurance represents the process that has as an objective to eliminate mistakes and to prevent defects. The concept initiated by Philip Crosby, stated that the quality of a product must be guaranteed by a system that is capable of assuring quality, and shows how the production process must take place through elaborate procedures through so called ISO Standard 9000.

The first concept of assuring the quality, was initially put into practice in Japan, and was named “Total Quality Management”, showing the supervision of quality inside an organization.

In any enterprise, no matter its dimensions, the quality of products and services has always been a valuable element, which assured a good functionality for the organization.

Gradually, this idea started to become a national interest concept.

Nowadays, Total quality management can be considered a set of managerial practices, a policy, met in an organization, meant to permanently assure the clients’ demands. This method is focused, especially on processes like measure and control. If this system is correctly implemented, it can reduce the maintenance costs, can grow the enterprise’s performance and can increase the number of satisfied clients.

For a proper operation of this method, there are 7 important principles that can be distinguished:

1. The quality can and must be controlled ;

2. Processes, not people, are the problem ;
3. You always have to find solutions, before you treat the “symptoms” ;
4. Every employee must be responsible for quality ;
5. The process of quality improvement must be continually made ;
6. The quality must be measurable ;
7. Quality must be perceived as a long term investment.

Once these principles are accomplished, the implementation of this method could be easily made.

2.1. TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT APPLIED IN HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

The method “Total Quality Management” applied in a hospital represents a philosophy that must involve every medical staff in a continual effort, in order to improve quality and achieve patient’s satisfaction.

Basically, the concept of “quality” in health care system represents the ability of a hospital/clinic/medical institution to meet and exceed patient’s expectations.

A Romanian hospital could deserve the term of “quality hospital” if it succeeds in meeting patient’s expectations like:

- Modern equipment
- Quality medical service
- Well trained medical staff
- Good conditions (nice and clean hospital rooms)
- Respectful nurses
- No wasted time, etc.

The implementation of this system supposes a change in every employee’s attitude, a completely changing mentality, starting with the top manager, until the last executant. Also, this implementation lasts a certain period of time, because of distrust of some people in the power of change.

In Romania’s health care system, unfortunately, there are constant dissatisfactions that affect not only a hospital, but also the patients and the image of the entire society.

Generally, in the health care system, the concept of quality has 2 main components: content and delivery. The content quality refers to the medical outcome achieved, describing the technical component of medical system, while the delivery quality refers to an individual customer’s interaction with a specific health care system.

2.1.1. OBJECTIVES OF THE TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT PHILOSOPHY APPLIED IN ROMANIAN HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

1. Focus on customer (patient) → identify and meet as much as possible the patient’s needs.

For example, the main needs that have to be accomplished are related to: elimination of the waste of time/movement/financial resources, assuring the right treatment and medicines, help the patient in order for him to get all the necessary information regarding his disease, assuring him comfort and clean conditions, etc.

2. Continuous improvement → continuous learning as well as problem solving

Example: 20 years ago, in Romania, the Faculty of Medicine was forming 2 different specialties: one of them named “family doctor” and the other “pediatric family doctor”. Today, these 2 specialties remained unchanged. The first one, treats only general medicine for adults, while the second one, only general medicine for children.

The issue nowadays lies in the fact that even though the 2 specialties are one different domain, each of them treats both adults and children. For example, the family doctor treats

also adults and children, and the pediatric family doctor treats also adults. This happens in today's state clinics, even if those doctors do not owe a competence for both domain (adults and children).

Continuous improvement could help these two specialties become one, or coexist. For that, family doctors could be trained how to treat the children's prophylaxis, while the pediatric family doctors could be trained the adults' prophylaxis.

3. Quality at the source → it represents an important concept that signifies the fact that doctors and nurses should be focused on the activities of a process in order for them to identify where good or bad quality is created.

Example: Every year, thousands of resident physicians chose for their internship programs different state hospitals from Romania. Unfortunately, these interns do not get the attention they need from doctors; they are not thought the processes, they are not explained slowly and practically what different processes are about, they just walk from doctor to doctor and try to "steal the job". In other words, medical interns are treated more or less like servants. They are used for elementary jobs (like handling a tissue, or talk to a patient) instead of being thought the medical process. The result is as expected: at their final exam, the interns fail or obtain very low grades, and they are redistributed where places are still available. In the end, they become the new generation of Romanian doctors.

The solution is not as complicated as it seems: in order to achieve quality at the source, every intern should be assigned to a certain doctor. Depending on the intern's results at his final exam, financial funds could be distributed at that clinic. For example, if an intern assigned to a certain doctor, gets a result above the average line, the clinic (where the doctor who learned the intern works) should receive, as a reward, financial funds, to cover its gaps (to buy modern equipment, to buy necessary sanitary elements etc).

4. Employee empowerment → this item defines the fact that all medical staff, including nurses, specialists, physicians, etc. are allowed to have total control over their work, organizing themselves as better as they can.

Example: In Romanian hospitals, employee empowerment is respected and everyone knows (or at least, should know) its own task and responsibility. Still, some medical errors still occur.

In clinics, especially at cabinets where physicians work, nurses are allowed to vaccinate the child (let's take for example a normal vaccine, compulsory in the first months of birth) while the doctor explains to the parents the procedure of preparing the right food for the little one.

Sometimes, nurses do not hit the right vein, or do not hit the right spot, on the baby's arm, and the child remains with sign or even gets a bruise.

That is why, in the sanitary system, employee empowerment should not be possible without a previous training.

As mentioned before, continuous improvement is not only for physicians, but also for nurses, who need to upgrade their knowledge in order to realize a more complex and well organized work.

After analyzing the most important characteristics, we can observe that hospitals from Romania need to implement Total Quality Management for 3 main reasons:

- To reduce costs
- To improve efficiency
- To assure high quality patient care

2.2.2. INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL HEALTH CARE QUALITY SYSTEM

The Romanian health care system must accomplish an internal and an external quality system. Once our sanitary institutions will achieve these two levels, then we can glory ourselves that we have a sanitary system aligned to the European Union's rules.

The internal quality system relies on 3 major components:

- Structure → refers to inputs represented by patients, trainings, medical equipment, etc.

In order to assure a quality structure, the health care system must provide a superior level of satisfaction for patients. This satisfaction can arrive by offering them good conditions of staying during their treatment period, a safety environment, lack of wasted time, good medical care, etc.

What is more, the improvement must be seen also for medical staff. Physicians, specialists and nurses must have constant trainings, in order for them to keep up with the evolution of different sanitary diseases. In present, our hospitals do not provide sufficient trainings for their employees. Or, in the case where trainings are available, for example we can talk about family doctors, these trainings coincide with the work schedule. So, if they chose to go at a specific training, someone else has to replace them for the whole working day. Since the law demands that each family doctor realize a specific number of consultations per day (otherwise, they won't be paid for the missing consultations), doctors prefer to continue their work, and miss the training.

- Processes → refer to the whole sanitary activity of planning, monitoring and analyzing the medical system's performance.

In our medical system, the processes can either represent an advantage or a disadvantage for the patient. For example, clinical decision, medication delivery or communication, can be helpful for the patient or can easily switch into medical errors (some of them even fatal). Let's take for example, the processes for patients living in the rural area. For them, medical treatments, medicines and even specialists arrive later than it should be. Unfortunately, the doctors refuse to work in the rural zone because the Government pays them only if they succeed in having 700 subscribed patients on their lists. Since some villages are very small, this number becomes achieved harder and harder.

This is a process that needs to be fixed immediately so that every patient, no matter the zone he is living in, rural or urban, can beneficiate from specialized medical assistance.

- Outcomes of care → are represented by the results of processes. Depending on a specific process, if it is helpful or not for the patient, the outcome delivers information and plans future actions to ensure the patient's satisfaction.

Regarding the external quality system for Romanian hospitals, here we can analyze the accreditation that each hospital has received.

In 2008, the European Union imposed Romania that until 2010, all our hospitals must be quality certified and capable to treat suffering people at high quality standards. In a recent study, conducted by the Health Care Ministry, only 77 sanitary institutions have been accredited, of a total equal to 500.

Basically, the accreditation of a hospital means, besides civilized accommodation conditions, also clear rules for each medical scheme. For example, every medical action executed by a nurse or a doctor should be made with completely responsibility; what is more, patients should be well treated and in perfect safety conditions.

In a recent interview, doctor Vasile Cepoi, the president of the National Commission for Hospital Accreditation (NCHA), explained that a number of 67 hospitals from Romania have been accredited during October-November 2014, after the stagnation of the process for 1 year, due to bureaucracy. What is more, in 2015 it is planned that almost 300

hospitals should pass the accreditation control, in order to obtain the accreditation agreement.

Moreover, to help the hospitals which are not able to pass the “accreditation test”, and so they risk an abolition, the authorities have decided, through a Government decision, that in every sanitary institution must exist a special team engaged in permanently assuring the quality management. Their role will be to facilitate the accreditation process.

By the end of 2015, the NCHA president hopes that more than 90% of Romania’s hospitals will be quality certified, even though this action was demanded almost 7 years ago by the European Union.

In Romania, the accreditation system is based on 3 important practices: the quality management system, organizing the health care services and the improvement of the medical practices.

More precisely, the accreditation relies on the patient, on the way the patient is treated by the medical staff, and the changes are imposed by a European Directive which assures not only the quality of the health care system, but also the safety of the European patients on all member states.

In present, the accreditation is made at the hospital’s demand, when the manager thinks that meets all the indicators imposed by NCHA, and the verification is accomplished by a team of certified evaluators, who come from different industries (doctors, jurists, economists, medical assistants, etc).

3. MAIN ADVANTAGES OF INTRODUCING TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT TO ROMANIAN HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

- Higher productivity. With a well-planned system, hospitals would not waste as much resources as they already do. Every medical staff would know exactly the job he/she has to provide, in order to assure patient’s satisfaction;
- Lack of defects and waste. One of the most intrigued kinds of wastes is the waste of time. Patients refuse to go to a specialist from a state hospital, because they have to wait sometimes more than 1 hour before entering the cabinet. With the help of TQM method, every hospital and clinic would organize an appointment system, so that patients would not be obliged to wait in the lobbies.
- Improve customer satisfaction. With the help of a well-organized medical system, people would stop accusing the doctors for everything that goes wrong, and would perceive him as it is: a man who tries his best to save other’s lives.
- Increase customer loyalty. A patient who is satisfied on the one hand, with his doctor, and on the second hand, with the medical services, would certainly return for the second, third and fourth time in the same place, even if the price is higher (the best example is with private clinics. Here patients spend significant amount of money, but still they prefer the private system, instead of the public one).
- Increase medical staff’s satisfaction. A more organized medical institution, assuring modern procedures, is welcomed by everyone. Hospitals’ managers should start from the premise that no one likes chaos. Every employee would prefer to start learning about an efficient procedure (even if this procedure would take time), rather than following no procedure at all, and doing an unorganized job. Also, knowing that the hospital manager cares about them (by offering the alternative already mentioned), the employees’ moral would increase significantly and the results would be seen in their day to day activity.

- Safety institutions. TQM comes not only with the above advantages, but also with the demand of improving processes. Therefore, applying the quality system in our health care institutions will demand also that every hospital and clinic to be quality certified and accredited.

All in all, as long as the Romanian health care system will try its best to assure the improvement of services (by introducing modern equipment and realizing a regular maintenance of these machines, by adopting standard operating procedures, etc), processes (by accrediting more and more sanitary institutions, by following the ISO guide, by trying as much as possible to detect defects early and also to correct them, etc) and people (assure trainings, organize regular meetings with employees, induct them a team spirit, motivating them etc), our hospitals will improve significantly. Since we already have high class doctors, so the problem is half solved, all we need to do is to manage our hospitals in terms of efficiency and efficacy.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The main principle that we are conscious about is that our sanitary system needs urgent improvements. These improvements have to be made mainly in the system and after that, at people. As long as our health care system is urging for efficient processes, and if no one will be able to provide it with improvements, our doctors and nurses will have no other choice than to relocate in a foreign health care system that is able to assure them an institution that respects not only them but also the patients.

If we want to keep our physicians home, in Romania, to treat our patients instead of some other countries' patients, a quality management system needs to be established.

Therefore, as soon as the system will be "repaired", the results will be obvious.

Setting out a method like Total Quality Management represents a measure that can be adopted from the inside. Therefore, talking to medical staff, listening to their point of views concerning the points where quality is missing, could be a step forward. Also, setting a list of quality issues, on each department and then assuring a feedback, while trying to find solutions for these issues, is also a plus.

To begin with, our hospitals need to have a quality management team. This can be formed from the employees or even from outside persons, who are taught the quality management principles. Their intention would not be to criticize the system, but to offer solutions and learning the other employees how can improve their work processes in order to assure patients' satisfaction.

All in all, the quality of medical services becomes, in the same measure, a priority for the health care suppliers, managers, patients and also for the governmental organizations.

The suppliers are willing to demonstrate their competences in hospitals. The patients are interested to get the necessary care, along with the respect of their rights, as soon as possible, from the chosen supplier. The payers are interested in introducing standards, indicators and quality criteria in order to efficiently manage the costs.

Yet, the Government is the one that has to control the activity from the health care system, through a legislation meant to favor the introduction of the quality management in sanitary units, and also facilitating the supplier's work and defending the patient from the medical system's deficiencies.

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