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Clinical Audit in Healthcare: Principles, Process, and Application to Patient Waiting Times

Akramov Azamat Aziz o'g'li
Toshkent davlat tibbiyot universiteti

Rami M F Abuaradeh
Toshkent davlat tibbiyot universiteti

Annotatsiya: Clinical audit is a cornerstone of quality improvement in modern healthcare, providing a systematic framework for evaluating and enhancing patient care by comparing current practices against established standards. This review outlines the fundamental principles of clinical audit, including its definition, types, benefits, and the cyclical process of implementation. The audit cycle involves identifying a problem, defining standards, collecting data, analysing results, implementing change, and re-auditing. To illustrate practical application, this paper presents a hypothetical clinical audit focused on patient waiting times in an outpatient setting. Evidence indicates that satisfaction declines after 30 minutes, and it is recommended that at least 90% of patients be seen within 30 minutes of their scheduled appointment. By auditing this key performance indicator, healthcare providers can identify inefficiencies and implement targeted interventions, ultimately improving patient satisfaction and clinical outcomes. This paper synthesises current evidence to demonstrate how clinical audit serves as an effective, cyclical quality improvement tool in contemporary healthcare settings.

Kalit so'zlar: Clinical audit, quality improvement, patient waiting time, healthcare standards, outpatient services, audit cycle, patient satisfaction, performance indicators.

Introduction

The assessment of quality in healthcare is essential for enhancing the standard of care through priority setting, improving ethical standards, and ensuring the appropriate utilisation of resources. This quality improvement requires a systematic programme that involves the entire healthcare organisation, focusing on quality through evidence-based activities such as clinical audit [1].

Clinical audit has been embedded in British hospital medical practice for over 20 years. In 1989, the Department of Health White Paper, 'Working for Patients', introduced medical audit, designed to implement the best available evidence by creating standards against which clinicians would measure themselves and improve [2]. Clinical audit is defined as a quality improvement process that seeks to improve patient care and outcomes through the systematic review of care against explicit criteria, typically conducted by a group of qualified peers [3].

Clinical audits can be categorised into four main types: clinical file review (scrutinising medical notes), peer review (practice review by colleagues), client cohort review (monitoring practice against standards), and selected criteria review (auditing a specific procedure or aspect of care). The

sharing of outcomes and identifying areas for immediate action can be a motivating factor, underscoring the importance of audit's role in enhancing the quality of care [4].

Patient waiting time is a widely recognised performance indicator in healthcare. It is defined as the time a patient spends waiting for services in a health facility or the time needed to be seen by medical staff [14,15]. Waiting times are a major concern in health policy across many OECD countries and are considered by the WHO as a key metric for measuring health system responsiveness [19,20]. Applying a clinical audit to this indicator provides a practical demonstration of how the audit process functions in real-world healthcare settings.

Methods

Benefits of Clinical Audit. Medical audit can be classified into internal (conducted regularly by institution staff) and external (performed by independent bodies for accreditation) [5]. Clinical auditing helps practitioners monitor and modify their own service delivery, promoting learning and prompting action to drive improvement in patient care [6]. This occurs when quality-related information is translated into actual changes in clinical outcomes [7]. Clinicians themselves report benefits from audit, including improved communication between professional groups, increased professional satisfaction, and enhanced knowledge [8]. Ultimately, clinical audit helps identify areas of service deficiency, recognise excellence, and develop recommendations for positive change [9].

The Audit Cycle. A clinical audit is carried out as a cycle composed of several stages. The common audit cycle involves improving current performance by setting ideal standards, measuring current performance against them, and implementing changes to move from the real to the ideal [10]. A medical audit has three core components: agreed criteria for good practice, methods for measuring performance, and a mechanism for implementing necessary changes [11]. The steps of a clinical audit, as illustrated by Limb et al. [12], are: (1) identifying a problem/topic, (2) defining standards/criteria, (3) collecting data, (4) analysing data, (5) implementing change, and (6) re-auditing.

Methodology of the Hypothetical Audit. This paper employs a hypothetical clinical audit of patient waiting times in an outpatient setting to demonstrate the practical application of the audit cycle. The audit follows the six-step framework described by Limb et al. [12]. A standard was set based on published evidence: at least 90% of patients should be seen by a doctor within 30 minutes of their scheduled appointment time [28]. Data would be collected prospectively over a defined period, recording the time each patient was registered and the time they were seen by a clinician. Results would be analysed to identify patterns and root causes of delays. Following intervention, a re-audit would be conducted using the same methodology to evaluate the impact of changes.

Results

Defining the Problem and Criteria. Waiting time refers to both the calendar time spent waiting for an appointment and the 'clock time' from the scheduled appointment to the actual consultation on the day of the visit [28]. Difficulties with the latter can arise from overbooking or first-come, first-served scheduling [28]. Common factors leading to long waiting times include a high patient load, too few doctors, and insufficient administrative staff [29].

Although waiting time in private clinics is often shorter [30], the expansion of outpatient services has increased patient visits, leading to overloading, poor access, and patient dissatisfaction [31]. There is no universally accepted ideal waiting time, but evidence suggests satisfaction levels decline after 30 minutes [15]. Waiting time duration varies significantly by location, with averages ranging from 60 minutes in Atlanta to 173 minutes in Michigan, USA [15].

Impact on Patient Satisfaction and Outcomes. Patient satisfaction levels are closely associated with the quality of services provided and long waiting times [22]. Longer waiting times are generally associated with lower patient satisfaction [24]. In addition to emotional and physical stress, prolonged waiting can result in loss of income for patients unable to work [25]. Increased waiting time may also worsen healthcare outcomes and increase sick leave duration [26,27]. Every aspect of a negative patient experience has been linked to the burden patients endure due to longer wait times [16].

In the hypothetical audit, after data collection and analysis (Steps 3 and 4), root causes would be identified. These may include overbooking practices, insufficient appointment slots, or poor administrative workflow. These findings would then inform targeted interventions at Step 5.

Discussion

The findings from this review highlight that clinical audit is a powerful and practical quality improvement tool when properly implemented. The hypothetical audit of patient waiting times demonstrates each stage of the audit cycle in a clinically meaningful context.

Flexible, tailored appointments adapted to a doctor's individual style have been shown to improve patient waiting times [24]. By auditing this quality indicator, a clinical audit can yield significant benefits by driving improvements in specific service areas [32]. Significant improvement is obtained by checking process performance, identifying sources of variability, and eliminating their undesirable effects [33].

In this hypothetical audit, after identifying long waiting times as a problem (Step 1) and setting a standard — 90% of patients seen within 30 minutes (Step 2) — data would be collected (Step 3) and analysed (Step 4) to find root causes. Changes such as implementing a new scheduling system would be introduced (Step 5), followed by a re-audit (Step 6) to measure the impact of these changes.

The healthcare industry has shifted to become more consumer-oriented, and patient satisfaction in care facilities is an important tool for measuring service quality, as it influences patient compliance and experience levels [23]. This underscores the value of continuously auditing waiting times and other patient-centred indicators to maintain and improve healthcare quality.

Conclusion

Clinical audit is an evidence-based, cyclical process that provides healthcare organisations with a structured mechanism to evaluate and improve the quality of patient care. This paper has outlined its principles, types, benefits, and step-by-step methodology, applying the framework to a hypothetical audit of outpatient waiting times.

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that prolonged waiting times negatively affect patient satisfaction, health outcomes, and healthcare efficiency. By systematically auditing this indicator — setting a standard of 90% of patients seen within 30 minutes, collecting and analysing data, implementing scheduling improvements, and re-auditing — healthcare providers can achieve measurable, sustainable improvements.

Clinical audit, when embedded into the culture of a healthcare organisation, serves not only as a corrective tool but also as a driver of continuous learning and professional development. Future research should focus on expanding audit frameworks to cover a broader range of patient-centred outcomes..

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