Challenges and Opportunities in Obstetrics Healthcare Risk Management Research

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PERSPECTIVE

While managing risk is something very common to healthcare providers, Risk Management is something very foreign. This editorial will explore the challenges and opportunities for growth amongst the Risk Management aspects of the healthcare field. While progress has been made, improvements are essential as one of the focus points in health care becomes a reduction in harms by the medical establishment.

“Risk management is the identification, assessment, and prioritization of risks followed by coordinated and economical application of resources to minimize, monitor, and control the probability and/or impact of unfortunate events” [1].

What is the Best Path to Completion of Patient Safety and Risk Management Research?

Planning and collaboration between Risk Managers and healthcare providers is optimal, with a leadership team consisting of both groups. A combination of senior and junior leadership can also be helpful, as senior leaders have experience and wisdom, and may have tried different interventions and have valuable lessons and input from past experiences. Junior leadership can sometimes provide greater enthusiasm and energy for a project, and be more creative in thinking about change [2]. Regular meetings between the leadership and the research group can be helpful, as this can help break large tasks into more manageable pieces and can also build camaraderie.

Once the research group is formed, research should center on a mutually agreed upon research question. The research question can be centered around a motivating event, such as Josie King’s story as detailed in the book, Safe Patients, Smart Hospitals by Peter Pronovost and Eric Vohr [3], or they could come from Patient Safety and Quality Control Groups, often times from junior- or mid-level healthcare providers, who see more patients, treat them more frequently, and sometimes have creative ideas about how to accomplish tasks differently.

The question is most effective if it is easily and cheaply measured in a patient population, it occurs frequently, and it is important to the group and patients. Issues such as pain, falls, incorrect medicine administration, and infections are common, mutually agreed upon areas open for question. The research group then needs to consider selecting an intervention that may be effective in changing the chosen outcome. Once the question and intervention are selected, working with a biostatistician can be helpful in assessing whether the research project can give a valid answer to the research question.

Once an appropriate project is selected, Institutional Review Board (IRB) application is appropriate, and research should not continue until approval is granted by the applicable governing bodies. Quality Improvement projects do not always require IRB approval, but usually cannot be published.

What are the Challenges to a Successful Patient Safety and Risk Management Project?

Risk management is something foreign to many healthcare providers, in that there is no provider training curriculum that focuses on risk management. While the Principles of Risk Management, as put forth by the International Organization for Standardization, suggest that Risk Managers should participate in value creation, and be an integral part of the healthcare team, many Risk Managers lack the extensive medical training that many healthcare providers have. This effectively dis-inhibits the positive contribution to the research field that Risk Managers may otherwise potentially provide [4]

Principles of Risk Management

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) includes the following principles of risk management:

create value – resources expended to mitigate risk should be less than the consequence of inaction, or (as in value engineering), the gain should exceed the pain

be an integral part of organizational processes

be part of decision making process

explicitly address uncertainty and assumptions [4]

With the sina qua non of medical research being the blinded randomized, controlled trial, the time, resources, sample size, and assessment tools to truly identify scientifically proven improvements in Risk Management are difficult to find. Instead...
cohort “before/ after” comparisons are made with their respective strengths and opportunities.

Risk management is, by definition, replete with risk, reevaluation, and risk aversion, and changing practice, even if it is thought to provide benefit in the realm of healthcare delivery, can itself be riskier both from an individual and a population perspective. In medicine, research focuses on situations of equipoise, where either answer to a question could be correct, and discovering the correct answer could provide worthwhile benefit to research subjects. Leaving that zone of comfort is essential in addressing the needs of patients, risk management, and our current health care system if it is to improve. Thankfully poor outcomes do not happen often in healthcare risk management, thus effect sizes of interventions are very small, and oftentimes expensive, time intensive population studies are the only way to definitively prove that an intervention is valuable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many aspects in the risk management field stand to benefit by adopting some of these ideas, though time, experience, and hopefully research will highlight the areas of maximum benefit. Risk Managers and healthcare providers should include medical quality improvement projects with health care providers in their training. This will serve to foster an interest in research and improvement amongst trainees, and “manage up” by showing senior healthcare risk managers the exciting opportunities that research provides. A collegial relationship could evolve between risk managers and health care providers with many possible positive implications.

REFERENCES