

Assessment for improvement: Healthcare Commission consults on new approach

The Healthcare Commission has announced its proposed new approach to assessing the performance of health-care organizations in England and that 2005 will be the last year of Star Ratings. The Healthcare Commission (Commission for Healthcare Audit and Inspection, or CHAI) was established under the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards) Act 2003 and came into existence in April 2004. It is a new body and took over the functions of Commission for Health Improvement (CHI), the Mental Health Act Commission and some value-for-money studies of the Audit Office.

DUTIES OF THE HEALTHCARE COMMISSION

The Healthcare Commission's main duties in England are to:

- Assess the management, provision and quality of NHS health care (including public health)
- Review the performance of each NHS trust and award an annual performance rating
- Publish information about the state of health care
- Consider complaints about NHS organizations that they themselves have not resolved
- Promote the coordination of reviews and assessments carried out by others, e.g. Audit Commission, Health and Safety Agency)
- Regulate the independent health-care sector through registration, annual inspection and enforcement
- Carry out investigation of serious failures in the provision of health care.

By statute, the Healthcare Commission is required to provide an annual performance rating of every NHS organization in England.

In the document *Assessment for Improvement* (Healthcare Commission, 2005), the Commission addresses its legal obligations in assessing and reviewing (and for the independent sector, regulating) health and health care, including the duties placed by the Race Relations Amendment Act. The proposals relate to England.

The Healthcare Commission also has certain duties in respect of Wales, mainly relating to national reviews and to the annual state of health-care report, which covers England and Wales. However, local inspection and investigation of NHS bodies in Wales rests with the Healthcare Commission Inspectorate Wales, while the Care Standards Inspectorate Wales inspects those organizations providing independent health care.

NATIONAL STANDARDS

National standards were established by the government in July 2004. The core standards relate to domains of safety, clinical- and cost-effectiveness, governance, delivering responsive care, care environment and amenities, patient focus and public health. The developmental standards are designed for a world in which the patient's expectations are increasing and in which the public has a right to expect improvements to services as a result of extra investment of money in the NHS. Patients expect the basics to be met and expect those providing health care to be striving for excellence.

The Healthcare Commission will assess the performance of NHS organizations by reference to these standards. It will ensure that basic standards are being met for everyone in the community, that health-care services provide value for money, and that relevant information on the performance of providers of health care is made avail-

able to patients and clinicians, enabling informed decisions to be reached. The developmental standards cover areas that many working in health care will see as something to aspire to. The Healthcare Commission is committed to the principle that assessments must be challenging but achievable, and must implement an improvement path where organizations move from a basic level toward current best practice. In time, it expects services to have improved. This means that a higher level of performance will be necessary at the lowest level to meet changing expectations.

THE PROPOSALS

The key elements of the Healthcare Commission's proposals are:

- Make the health check broader than the current system of star ratings, and to cover standards that matter to patients, such as safety and the care environment
- Measure what matters to patients, the public and those providing care
- Make inspections targeted, so that they focus on areas where there are concerns, freeing front-line staff to care for patients
- The Healthcare Commission will also reduce the burden of regulation by using information gathered by health-care organizations and other regulators
- Introduce spot checks, unannounced visits, patient forums and information from local authorities to check the data given to the Healthcare Commission
- Publish information about all of the Healthcare Commission's findings so that people can use and understand them
- Ensure that patients can compare services and make informed choices by giving them information on the

quality of care in both the public and private sector.

The overall aim of these proposals is to encourage improvement and respond to what local people want from their local services.

ASSESSMENT

The assessments the Healthcare Commission will make of the performance of NHS trusts are designed to help answer two questions:-

1. Is the organization getting the basics right?
2. Is it making and sustaining progress?

To answer these questions, the Healthcare Commission proposes a system of assessment with several components to be assessed and reported on separately. The components will be brought together for each trust's annual performance rating. In 2005 and 2006 the Healthcare Commission will concentrate on how well core standards are met, and will require trusts to make a public declaration on the extent to which the organization is meeting these standards. This will be checked against other available information and will include the views of patients and other partners in the local health community. The developmental standards point to the improvements that the government expects all trusts to make to improve the quality of care and treatment provided. The

Healthcare Commission will:

- Assess the performance of NHS trusts in working towards new national priorities and targets for improved outcomes and better experiences of health care for patients
- Over time, assess the performance of NHS trusts in working towards local targets
- Carry out improvement reviews which will assess the quality of health care by reference to developmental standards from a range of starting points. These reviews will be concerned with the patient's experience across and between health-care organizations.

The Healthcare Commission will assess each component of the system of assessment and these should, over a period of time, provide a richer picture of the services provided by trusts. The consultation period ends on the 21 February and is open to every one

involved or interested in health care, from clinical groups, health services managers, independent health-care practitioners and non-clinical staff to patients, carers and the public. The Healthcare Commission has produced a range of consultation materials and these materials and additional supporting information are available on the Commission's website (<http://consultation.healthcarecommission.org.uk/site/>). **HM**

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Healthcare Commission (2005) *Assessment for Improvement: Our Approach*. A consultation document on the assessment of the performance of healthcare organisations. <http://consultation.healthcarecommission.org.uk/download/Assessment%20for%20improvement.pdf> (accessed 2 February 2005)

KEY POINTS

- The Healthcare Commission has announced its proposed new approach to assessment of performance of health-care organizations.
- For 2005 and 2006 the Commission will concentrate on how well core standards are met.
- Trusts will be required to make a public declaration in relation to meeting these standards.
- Over time, the Commission will assess performances of NHS trusts in working towards local targets.
- The Commission invites and welcomes comments on these proposals.