

Understanding Healthcare Standards

Standards are explicit statements of expected quality in the performance of a health care activity. They may take the form of procedures, clinical practice guidelines, treatment protocols, critical paths, algorithms, standard operating procedures, or statements of expected health care outcomes, among other formats. Standards communicate expectations for how a particular health care activity will be performed in order that it achieve the desired results and define, for both health workers and clients, what is needed to produce quality services. Performance in accordance with standards is thus the cornerstone of quality assurance in health care and the end result to which a wide range of quality assurance activities lead, including accreditation of health facilities, external quality evaluation, and performance improvement. The field of quality assurance is also focused on performance according to standards because adherence to evidence-based standards has been shown to be associated with improved health outcomes. Moreover, failure to provide clinical care in accordance with standards has serious negative effects on patient outcomes.

Standards may be **explicit** (written) or **implicit** (understood). *Implicit* health care standards derive from the expertise of professionals who work in a specific environment. For example, professionals who work on a pediatric ward may know the treatment that a dehydrated child needs, but may have different ideas about the most appropriate way to provide the treatment (e.g., dosage, duration, and frequency). Converting implicit standards to explicit standards provides consensus on the way to provide quality care, reduces variation between health care providers, and allows a baseline measure for monitoring quality. *Explicit* health care standards appear in a variety of forms, such as procedures, protocols, or clinical practice guidelines. These standards may be developed by government entities (CMS), professional organizations (e.g., nursing councils, medical associations), international organizations (e.g., the World Health Organization), accrediting organizations (e.g., Joint Commission International), or by a hospital itself. To achieve expected health outcomes, standards must be developed in such a way that they are:

- **Realistic** - the standards can be followed or achieved with existing resources
- **Reliable** - Following the standards for a specific intervention results in the same outcome (all factors being equal)
- **Valid** - The standards are based on scientific evidence or other acceptable experience
- **Clear** - The standards are understood in the same way by everyone concerned and are not subject to distortion or misinterpretation
- **Measurable** - Performance according to the standards may be assessed and quantified