

Lean thinking for medical practices

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Abstract: Lean thinking is a process-based method that considers the interactions across the whole supply chain, including identifying patient value, developing flow production that minimises waiting times and stress in the waiting room, use of pull mechanisms to support material flow, and the reduction of all forms of waste. Lean strategy helps accelerate a patient's journey through the practice. A technological approach by adding smart room technology that projects images and scenes and plays stress-relieving music may lessen the boredom of waiting. The advantages of care allow the patient to be pulled gently through the practice systems. The desired culture supportive of lean thinking is one in which employees are encouraged and valued for both challenging existing work processes and providing services that ensure practice viability. Lean thinking in medical practices allows the opportunity to resolve inefficiencies, effect a reduction in costs, and achieve a higher turnaround using the same staff and processes, but in a more effective manner.

Key words: lean thinking, medical practice, strategy

INTRODUCTION

Lean thinking is a process-based method that considers the interactions across the whole supply chain. Within a medical practice, support services (health service administration), health records and secretarial services should work together in a system that encourages unity of effort, promotes team working and puts the patient first. The patient needs to feel welcome and not face a grumpy, overworked healthcare worker. Within this context, the strategic objectives of lean thinking include identifying patient value, e.g. efficiency of appointment booking; management of a value stream from the time an appointment is made to seeing a doctor; developing flow production that minimises waiting times and stress in the waiting room; use of pull mechanisms to support material flow, e.g. computerised patient records and the reduction of all forms of waste, e.g. excessive paperwork [1-5].

Health care lean thinking may be affiliated with the Toyota production system focusing on excellent medical practices [6]. The philosophy of lean thinking based on the ideas developed by Womack and Jones [7] is best applied in health care as a long term method. In a practice, this may be divided into cohorts of five years with an annual review of performance against set targets. Error inherent in the execution of a process is waste [8]. All members within the practice should be involved, including doctors, so that incidents, solutions and fixes are designed to effectively improve safety via consideration of human and organisational issues [9]. Medical errors sometimes occur through faulty systems and processes that lead people to make mistakes [10]. In a practice, this may be due to a doctor being absent or a jammed telephone system which prevents the patient from making an appointment. Ultimately, lean strategy helps accelerate a patient's journey [11] through the practice.

Lean thinking in a medical practice. Patients are often suggested to a doctor by the local health authority; this is restrictive and the patient should be given the choice to change doctors within a practice. Queuing times are reduced if there is an electronic signing-in device at reception that enables patients to register their arrival by indicating sex, date-of-birth and confirming the allocated appointment time. Often in a practice the telephone is jammed with calls resulting in frustrated waiting times and delayed appointments. One should therefore set up a system that enables selection of the appropriate process for registering, signing in, and booking a chosen appointment. Waiting areas in the classic practice tend to be gloomy, with bare walls and closed windows. Perhaps adding cheerful and interesting pictures and posters and a variety of interesting magazines, will lessen the stress of waiting. We suggest a technological approach by adding smart room technology that projects images and scenes and plays stress-relieving music. Specific scenes could be played in different seating cubicles depending on patient preference. In some practices the provision of internet facilities has been welcomed by patients. Tropical plants and unusual growth are often appealing to visitors. The need for a designated play area for young children is obvious.

Lean journeys in a practice. During a patient's journey, all the care process can be connected from admission, to diagnosis and prescription, and thence to follow-up. The patient must not be made to feel that the doctor is a pill-pusher and is there simply for monetary gain. Lean approaches can be used to reorganise the way in which a particular task is completed or a practice functions. Part of the annual profit should be apportioned to improvements in the practice. In many surgeries there is the assumption of hygiene, but this is not in the forefront of the patient's mind. For example, the inclusion of alcohol-gel and notices instructing people to wash their hands prior to entering the practice are all important measures for the patient's care. In effect, the advantages of care allow the patient to be pulled gently through the practice systems [12]. However, organisational resistance to change

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and deeply entrenched ways of thinking amongst health care workers in the practice need to be addressed in order to find the right balance between innovation and complexity [13]. The desired culture supportive of lean thinking is one in which employees are encouraged and valued for both challenging existing work processes and providing services that ensure practice viability. In the context of regional health provision, embedded lean theory is an opportunity to achieve progress within practices via a try and test approach, itself taking time to embed. Indeed, it will not provide a quick fix for all ills, but it promises to deliver significant improvements over the medium to long term. The potential for continuous improvement is therefore genuinely huge.

CONCLUSION

Lean thinking in medical practices allows the opportunity to resolve inefficiencies, effect a reduction in costs and achieve a higher turnaround using the same staff and processes, but in a more effective manner. Lean provides careful and rigorous ways of arguments for change. The practice manager should expound an aura of inspiration to drive its success. Leadership qualities, engagement/involvement procedures, and communications are key facets in translating the practice policy from initiation into implementation.

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