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Six Sigma in Hospital Administration: A Systematic Review of Applications, Outcomes, and Challenges

Faller, Erwin M.[1], Lakkian, Sitti Jehan A.[2]

[1]Graduate School, St. Bernadette of Lourdes College, Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines
[2]Doctor of Medicine, Far Eastern University- Dr. Nicanor Reyes Medical Foundation, Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines
[3]Panamao District Hospital- Ministry of Health (BARMM), Panamao, Sulu, Philippines
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ABSTRACT

Healthcare systems have started adopting Six Sigma, a manufacturing-based quality improvement strategy that relies on data for decision making. This paper looks at how the principles of Six Sigma are applied in hospitals and their operational processes. They sought to establish the current state of knowledge and use regarding Six Sigma within healthcare environments by analyzing all published literature available in PubMed about the topic. The research also delves into such areas like patient care as well as efficiency with which operations flow through hospitals; tools used under this methodology will be discussed alongside various techniques employed while implementing them within hospital settings so too its ability to cut down costs without compromising quality shall not miss scrutiny too. According to different studies conducted across many departments including ERs, ORs and Admin offices among others showed that there were some positive results seen after implementing six sigma projects where patients had better outcomes; they got treated faster due to reduced waiting times thus more resources were utilized efficiently leading into shorter periods required for staff members' response time towards attending them but still results achieved were long term since it could work over complex adaptive systems even though such endeavors might encounter challenges during implementation because this approach is not easy to apply in such kind of environment. Therefore, when rightly carried out, there is much proof pointing out that six sigma can help greatly in advancing quality health care services provision coupled with process optimization especially within hospital management setting but only if leaders choose adopt it correctly considering all these difficulties highlighted herein may hinder its success rate Furthermore findings from this review show that besides being widely applicable across various departments of the hospitals which include emergency service department among others still there exists few challenges associated with utilizing six sigma more so within dynamic complex adaptive systems characterized by uncertainty where multiple variables come into play at once requiring simultaneous change interventions over interdependent levels therefore signifying its potential usefulness as powerful tool towards enhancing organizational performance throughout health care delivery system while operating under ever shrinking resource base driven competitive environment for any given healthcare industry leader seeking improvement should never overlook these issues highlighted.

Keywords: Six Sigma, hospital administration, quality improvement, process optimization, healthcare management, patient outcomes, operational efficiency

INTRODUCTION

Six Sigma is a data-driven methodology for process improvement that has gained popularity in the healthcare industry, particularly in hospital administration. Owing its roots to the manufacturing industry, Six Sigma seeks to eliminate defects and reduce variation within processes in order to enhance quality and productivity (Antony et al., 2007). In this regard, the health sector has realized that it can help solve problems related to cost containment; patient safety; as well as quality of care.

Hospitals have unique challenges such as complicated procedures; life-or-death outcomes under their watch; strict regulations among others. Therefore as health organization's seek operational efficiency improvements alongside better patient care provision strategies; Six Sigma has proved very promising. For example, Bahensky et al. (2005) demonstrated that Lean Sigma was applicable to health care systems thus indicating potential benefits through process improvements coupled with savings on costs.

The adoption of Six Sigma in healthcare has yielded positive outcomes so far. According to Niemeijeret al.(2012), after five years of implementing Lean Six Sigma at University Medical Center Rotterdam significant changes were recorded both in terms of patient logistics and quality care provided for them. Similarly, Ahmed et al.(2018) found out that there were positive impacts on Lean Six sigma implementation towards Malaysian hospitals' performance level(s) associated with Quality Improvement Projects(QIPs).

However like any other thing there are challenges faced when applying six sigma into medical practice areas . For instancePocha (2010) pointed out difficulties experienced while adapting six sigma methodologies within Veterans Affairs Medical Centers due to contextual differences between this

sector and others. Nevertheless some researchers believe that combining lean thinking with six sigma may bring better results than using either approach alone based on findings from studies such as Lee et.al(2018) which were conducted at various hospitals across Korea.

Six sigma has found application in different aspects of hospital management systems . A good example is where Bastaet.al(2016) used lean six sigma to reduce the turnaround time of medical reports from hospitals to primary care centers thereby facilitating better communication between different levels within the healthcare delivery system. Another notable area involves Taggeet al.(2017) who applied Lean Six Sigma methodology aimed at improving efficiency in operating rooms within an academic children's hospital leading to significant savings as well as improved utilization rates.

With global health systems being under immense pressure due to rising expectations for quality service provision alongside limited resources, it is important that we appreciate the potential benefits associated with adopting a six sigma approach in hospital management. This review seeks to bring together findings of various studies so as to provide holistic understanding about how this methodology has been used across different contexts within health care settings and its impact on performance improvement(s) within such institutions.

METHODS

The review examines the methods used in the combined papers on the use of six sigma in hospital management. Different ways were used by these studies to carry out and assess six sigma projects in healthcare establishments which is a clear indication that there are many different environments or goals for hospitals' leadership.

Study Designs and Methodological Approaches

The reviewed literature encompassed a range of study designs:

1. Case Studies: Several studies have used a case study design to describe the implementation of Six Sigma projects in specific hospital departments or processes. For example, Tagge et al. (2017) applied the Lean Six Sigma approach to enhance the efficiency of operating room services in an academic children's hospital. The authors followed the traditional DMAIC model (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control) which was shared among several other studies.
2. Systematic Reviews: A number of studies including Glasgow et al. (2010) conducted systematic reviews aimed at guiding quality improvement for inpatients using Lean and Six Sigma methodologies. The researchers synthesized findings from various healthcare settings where multiple implementations were done thus providing a wider understanding about the performance of Six Sigma in healthcare.
3. Quantitative Analyses: Quantitative techniques were commonly used to determine the effects produced by Six Sigma projects. For instance, Niemeijer et al. (2012) statistically analyzed 5 years' impact of Lean Six Sigma application at a University Medical Center. These investigations mainly compared key performance indicators before and after implementation.
4. Qualitative Assessments: Some investigators like Knapp (2015) looked into organizational issues related with deploying Six Sigma and employed qualitative methods such as interviews and surveys to establish how Lean six sigma implementation affects organizational culture.
5. Mixed Methods: Lee et al. (2018) carried out exploratory research that involved joint utilization of Lean & six sigma within hospitals; they utilized statistical approaches to analyze survey data while also conducting qualitative assessments on organizational factors.

Comparative Analysis of Methodologies

When comparing methodologies across studies, several patterns emerge:

1. DMAIC Framework: The DMAIC structure has been used in most researches, showing a systematic way of solving problems and improving processes. Nevertheless, the tools employed in each phase differed from one hospital to another depending on their contexts as well as project scopes.
2. Integration with Lean: Some researchers like Al-Zain et al., (2019) have incorporated Lean principles into Six Sigma thereby implying that there is a growing trend towards comprehensive quality enhancement methods in healthcare.
3. Adaptation to Healthcare: Many articles have called for the adaptation of conventional Six Sigma instruments to fit within the healthcare environment. To illustrate this point, Improta et al., (2020), used "Agile" Six Sigma approach while working in a pediatric hospital which emphasized on methodological flexibility.

Measurement and Evaluation Techniques

The studies employed various techniques to measure and evaluate the impact of Six Sigma implementations:

1. Financial Standards: Two of the most common standards were cost savings and return on investment, as indicated by Sunyog in (2004) and Tagge et al. (2017).
2. Performance Measures: Basta et al. (2016) found that process cycle times, wait times, and resource utilization were some frequently used measures.

3. Quality Markers: Ahmed et al. (2018) used patient satisfaction scores, error rates, and clinical outcomes as indicators for quality while Carsten et al. (2023) considered these too but added others.
4. Cultural Evaluation: Knapp (2015) suggested including measures of organizational culture and staff engagement to evaluate the broader impact of implementing Six Sigma in an organization.

Limitations and Methodological Challenges

Several studies acknowledged limitations in their methodologies:

1. Lack of Control Groups: Most case studies did not feature control groups, thus it was difficult to attribute change only to Six Sigma.
2. Short-term Focus: Many studies were limited in that they looked at outcomes over a short period without following up to see if the changes lasted or not.
3. Contextual Variations: Variations in healthcare settings were so extreme that generalizing from one hospital to another became impossible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Different healthcare settings and processes have produced different results regarding the utilization of Six Sigma in hospital management. A few major themes were discovered and outcomes realized after applying the Six Sigma tactics within hospital walls during this investigation, but there are still some worries and potential drawbacks to be noted.

Operational Efficiency and Cost Reduction

Multiple researches show that Six Sigma has resulted in significant enhancements of operational efficiency and cost reduction. In a University Medical Center, Niemeijer et al. (2012) estimated $3 million of savings per year after five years of using Lean Six Sigma. A similar case was recorded by Tagge et al., where the utilization of operating rooms increased by 23% with an associated $975,645 saved over ten months at an academic children's hospital (2017). Nevertheless, not all reports were as optimistic about this methodology; for examplePocha (2010) found it hard to implement six sigma in a Veterans Affairs Medical Center thus suggesting its effectiveness may vary depending on healthcare context.

Patient Care Quality and Safety

Many studies have proven that Six Sigma can enhance patient care quality and safety. In Malaysia, for example, Lean Six Sigma was implemented and resulted in better patient satisfaction as well as fewer medical errors (Ahmed et al., 2018). By using communication domains of patient satisfaction as a focus area, Carsten et al. (2023) were able to significantly improve patient-provider communication scores within their regional community hospital through the application of Six Sigma methodology; nevertheless whether these improvements will be sustained over the long term or not has been left unanswered by Glasgow et al. (2010) who indicated continuous commitment along with resources needed for maintaining benefits derived from this project type throughout time.

Process Optimization

Various studies have shown that Six Sigma is able to optimize certain medical center procedures. To reduce the time taken for dispatching medical reports from hospitals to primary care units by 91% (from 11 days to 1 day), Basta et al. made use of Lean Six Sigma in their study conducted in 2016. Another author, Wolfe et al., implemented Lean Six Sigma in a private hospital context and managed to shorten operation note completion time by half (50%).

Challenges in Implementation

Implementing Six Sigma in healthcare has challenges despite the good that it does. It was found by Pocha (2010) that there are difficulties associated with trying to apply Six Sigma techniques within such a complex and variable system like healthcare. According to Knapp (2015), lean six sigma can only be successful if this is done within an organization which promotes continuous improvement as part of its culture, thus hospitals should foster such institutions for lean six sigma programs to work effectively.

Integration with Other Methodologies

According to various investigations, incorporating Six Sigma with other quality improvement methodologies can improve results. In relation to this matter, Lee et al. (2018) observed that hospitals which adopted both Lean and Six Sigma techniques performed better than those which used either of them singly. This implies that a joint approach may be more appropriate for dealing with the diverse healthcare challenges.

Applicability Across Hospital Departments

The analysis shows that Six Sigma has been used in different departments of the hospital successfully. Huckaby (2020) showed that it was able to help improve staff levels at an acute hemodialysis unit, and Improta et al.'s work at a pediatric hospital is another example (2020). These findings imply that this method can be applied universally within healthcare systems.

Long-term Sustainability

Although several investigations show immediate advantages, people still argue about the durability of Six Sigma improvements in medical care over a long period. It is important to continuously invest effort and money into such schemes so that Glasgow et al. (2010) said they can be maintained.

To sum up, if applied correctly and modified according to the needs of healthcare system, six sigma has proved itself capable of making great positive changes in hospital management procedures while at the same time reducing costs incurred during patient treatment or care provision. However, this success comes with its own obstacles which are mainly connected with cultural diversity within organizations; complex nature of processes involved and their sustainability beyond short term basis among other things. Further studies should concentrate on what happens after many years have elapsed since implementation as well as integrating these two approaches towards quality improvement in health care settings for future reference.

CONCLUSION

This review of the application of Six Sigma in hospital administration reveals a methodology with significant potential to improve healthcare delivery, operational efficiency, and patient outcomes. The evidence from various studies demonstrates that Six Sigma, when properly implemented, can lead to substantial improvements in hospital processes, cost reduction, and patient satisfaction.

Key findings from this review include:

1. In the healthcare industry, Six Sigma has been applied in different hospital departments such as operating rooms and administrative processes which supports its adaptability.
2. Several studies have reported that many organizations were able to save significant amounts of money and improve their efficiency by implementing Six Sigma thereby proving that it is financially beneficial.
3. Hospitals using a six sigma approach recorded fewer medical errors and higher levels of patients' satisfaction due to improved quality of care.
4. Results appear to be better when Lean methodology is used alongside other quality improvement techniques than when they are implemented singly.
5. The problem lies in the fact that health care processes are intricate and organizational culture is what makes implementation difficulties
6. More research is needed regarding how long-term sustainability can be achieved by making improvements through Six Sigma in various healthcare settings.

Even though the advantages of hospital management using six sigma can be seen, there are still some challenges in its implementation. When adopting this approach healthcare leaders need to take into account peculiarities of their organizations such as organizational culture, personnel training and resource allocation.

Further studies should examine long-term outcomes of six sigma projects in healthcare, strategies for sustainable implementation and development of tools and techniques specific to healthcare for six sigma. Moreover, more research on how to integrate six sigma with other quality improvement methodologies in healthcare may give useful hints to practitioners.

To sum up, hospitals that want to enhance their operational efficiency and quality of care could find six sigma helpful. Nevertheless, success will only be achieved if it is carefully adapted for use within the context of health care delivery systems; supported by leadership at all levels throughout an organization coupled with continuous learning amongst staff which creates value based on customer needs satisfaction. Therefore, as cost containment becomes increasingly important while trying to improve patient outcomes through better standards achievement so too must – we not forget about this very powerful tool called Six Sigma.

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