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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Educational needs of medical service providers on issues of continuous improvement of the quality of integrated medical care and ways of providing them

Nataliia M. Mykytenko[1], Mykhailo D. Diachuk[2], Yaroslava S. Demydenko[1], Hanna V. Inshakova[1,2], Tetiana S. Gruzieva[1,2]

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To determine modern strategies of quality assurance in medical care and to meet educational needs of health care professionals regarding the quality of medical care.

Materials and Methods: The study programme included sociological surveys of healthcare professionals on their educational needs in terms of quality assurance of medical care. The study used bibliosemantic, sociological, medical and statistical methods, and content analysis. The study materials included scientific publications, the WHO program documents, national-level regulations and questionnaires on their educational needs in terms of quality of care and patient safety.

Results: Data show that, there are still a lot of problems in quality assurance and safety of health care services. The respondents highly appreciated the results of implemented JCI requirements at the healthcare facility ([mean ± standard error] 4,3±0,07 points on a five-point scale), the level of information about current operational processes, changes, plans etc. (4,4±0,06), the clarity and comprehensibility of the quality assurance tasks (4,5±0,04), the control method (4,6±0,05), and the attitude of the management (4,6±0,05). The need to improve knowledge and acquire more competencies in health care quality was identified ([rate ± standard error] 88,4±2,30 respondents per 100 respondents).

Conclusions: The assessments by health care providers of the quality of medical care, level of knowledge on these issues and the need to improve them, with prioritization of topics and forms of training, found in the course of the study, form the basis for the programs of continuous improvement of medical care quality.

KEY WORDS: health care system; policy and strategy; quality assurance of medical care; educational needs; continuous professional development

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INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals set by the international community envisage achieving universal coverage of quality healthcare services globally. The 2019 UN Political Declaration reaffirms the commitment to gradually provide quality basic healthcare services to an additional 1 billion people by 2023, and to the entire world population by 2030. Improving the quality of healthcare services is seen as a priority factor in strengthening healthcare systems and improving public health [1, 2].

It is well known that the quality of health services is measured by the following characteristics: efficiency, safety, humaneness, timeliness, equity, comprehensiveness, rationality [3]. The national quality policy and strategy is an organized effort to stimulate and plan quality improvement activities on a national scale [4].

Health care quality policies and strategies are based on a set of actions that need to be taken within the national health care system to create an enabling environment, reduce harm, improve care and engage with patients, families and communities. In this regard, an indicative list of measures for each of these areas of quality assurance has been developed for use by countries [3, 4].

As it is important to achieve high quality health care, the World Health Organization (WHO) supports countries in developing, improving and implementing national quality assurance policies and strategies to ensure a comprehensive approach to quality health care [5].

However, despite the efforts made by countries to ensure the quality of healthcare services, the results of this work are not always sufficient. In high-income countries, 7 per cent of hospitalized patients develop avoidable hospital-acquired infections. In low- and middle-income countries, 5,7-8,4 million deaths are registered annually, which are associated with poor quality of healthcare. At the same time, 60% of deaths from conditions requiring medical care in these countries are caused by inadequate medical care, while other deaths occur as a result of non-use of the healthcare system [5, 6].

Around 15% of hospital costs in high-income countries are allocated to address preventable complications arising

from healthcare and patient harm. The economic and social costs of patient harm, including disability, incapacity for work and lost productivity, are estimated at trillions of dollars annually [7].

WHO proposes a number of approaches and tools to improve activities aimed at achieving an appropriate level of quality of care for different population groups. In particular, a network for improving the quality of maternal, newborn and child health care has been established [8], which proposes the Five Functions for Improving the Quality of Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Care [9], maternal and perinatal death surveillance and response [10]; Standards for Improving the Quality of Maternal and Newborn Care in Health Care Facilities [11]; Standards for Improving the Quality of Child and Adolescent Health Care in Health Facilities [12]; Standards for Improving the Quality of Child and Adolescent Health Care in Health Facilities [13]. The WHO Concept for Integrated People-Centred Health Services [14], Practical approaches and resources to support policies, strategies and practices for quality health services and palliative care [15], Guidelines for planning quality immunization services [16], Guidelines for planning quality health services [17], etc. were also developed.

The frameworks, strategies and standards developed by WHO provide a sound basis for defining national quality policies and strategies for health services in each country, taking into account the national context.

The issue of ensuring high quality healthcare services is extremely relevant for Ukraine. The current vector of development of the national healthcare system of Ukraine is defined by the Strategy for the Development of the Healthcare System until 2030. Among a number of directions of the Strategy, one of the main ones is universal healthcare coverage, which involves improving people's health through the implementation of an effective integrated model that ensures balanced, evidence-based, continuous provision of quality and safe services [18].

Achieving the goals of universal coverage of the population with quality healthcare services requires an in-depth analysis of the current state and existing approaches to ensuring the quality of service at various levels of government, recommendations of international organizations on these issues, and experience in this area with due attention to all components, including human resources.

AIM

The aim of the study was to improve the quality of medical care by identifying the educational needs of healthcare professionals on the quality of medical care.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The bibliosemantic, sociological, medical and statistical methods, and content analysis were used in the study. The study materials included scientific publications, WHO and WHO Regional Office for Europe policy documents, national-level regulations, and sociological survey questionnaires among healthcare professionals. The study programme included sociological surveys of healthcare professionals on their educational needs in terms of quality assurance of medical care. Average and relative values were presented with standard errors.

The study complied with the basic principles of the Council of Europe Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine, World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki on the ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects, and current national regulations. As the surveys were anonymous, the respondents' participation was assumed to be voluntary, the principles of medical ethics were not violated.

RESULTS

The analysis of WHO strategic and programme documents demonstrates the relevance of improving the quality of health care services to achieve the strategic goals of sustainable development in the context of universal health coverage.

The WHO Guidelines for National Quality Policy and Strategy (2018) pay considerable attention to the development of national policy and strategy, setting goals and priorities, defining quality at the local level, involving stakeholders in this process, situational analysis of the quality status, creating management and organizational structures for quality assurance, management information systems, defining quality attributes and key parameters, planning methods and measures aimed at introducing innovations, and the development of an operational plan for implementation [3].

Since human resources are the key determinants of the quality of healthcare, the issues of personnel development and retention in healthcare institutions are becoming a priority. Training and engagement of human resources is an effective measure to address the problem of limited human resources. It is advisable to use incentive mechanisms that influence the attitude of employees towards quality assurance processes. It is important that the attitude of medical personnel towards ensuring good quality of services becomes a sustainable norm in the provision of health care.

The WHO document "Delivering Quality Health Services: a Global Imperative for Universal Health Coverage" (2018) emphasizes the five most important components of quality health care, which are health workforce, health care organizations, medicines, devices and other technologies, information systems and financing. To ensure quality of care as one of the pillars of the health system, governments, policy makers, health system leaders, patients and providers should work together to ensure a highly qualified health workforce; excellence in all health care settings; safe and effective use of medicines, devices and other technologies; efficient use of health systems; and the development of financial mechanisms that support continuous quality improvement [4].

Of particular note is the WHO document "Quality Health Services: a Planning Guide" [17], which focuses on the basic requirements for quality initiatives, such as local support, quality measurement, exchange and learning, stakeholder and community involvement, and governance. There is a need for careful planning of local support at different levels

of government based on the identified gaps. A structured approach to improving the performance of healthcare workers in healthcare facilities through visits to support quality assurance of service delivery is advisable. Particular attention should be paid to the development of coaching and mentoring mechanisms and their implementation in the activities of healthcare facilities.

The WHO publication Five Functions to Improve Maternal, Newborn and Child Health is aimed at ensuring the quality of obstetric, gynecological and pediatric care [9]. It presents five interrelated functions that support and scale up the implementation of quality of care interventions from the national and subnational levels to the health facility level. Clear information is provided to support policy makers, managers, practitioners and implementing partnerships working to improve the quality of care for maternal, newborn and child health. The paper points out that learning and the sharing of good practices and mistakes are fundamental to the improvement of the quality of services. A training system between health professionals and managers enables regular exchange of experience and can lead to adaptation and extension.

Since the quality of health care is crucial for achieving universal health coverage and sustainable development, and a significant proportion of the world's population lives in environments that are considered fragile, conflict-affected and vulnerable, the WHO resource "Quality of Care in Fragile, Conflict-Affected and Vulnerable Settings: Taking Action" was launched in 2020 [19]. This report states that delivering quality health services to fragile, conflict and vulnerable environments is challenging. Despite the difficulties of quality assurance in such conditions, there is an urgent need for action to provide quality health care in view of the significant needs of the population. "Quality of Care in Fragile, Conflict-Affected and Vulnerable Settings: Tools and Resources Compendium" [20] is a collection of accompanying tools and resources offered as a means of supporting efforts and actions to improve the quality of health care. It recognizes the urgent and specific needs and challenges related to quality of care in situations of fragility, conflict and vulnerability.

An important aspect of ensuring quality of care for mothers and children is maternal and perinatal mortality surveillance [10]. Maternal and perinatal mortality surveillance and response is a continuous cycle of identifying reports, analyzing cases, and taking action to improve the quality of care and prevent future deaths.

Given the importance of external quality assessment in ensuring the quality of care for the population, in 2022, WHO prepared the publication Healthcare Accreditation and Quality of Care: Exploring the Role of Accreditation and External Evaluation of Healthcare Facilities and Organizations [21]. It presents a broad view of accreditation as an intervention to ensure the quality of healthcare using the evidence base of accreditation and other similar external assessments along with global interdisciplinary experience and knowledge.

The WHO European Region has developed the resource "Improving Healthcare Quality in Europe. Characteristics, Effectiveness and Implementation of Different Strategies" [22]. It emphasizes various forms of quality assurance in healthcare services, including the creation of standards for healthcare professionals, healthcare technologies and healthcare facilities; audit and feedback; fostering a culture of patient safety; public reporting; and payment for quality.

Thus, information and education play an important role in improving the quality of healthcare services. WHO therefore urges countries to create and maintain a high level of professionalism in the health workforce, capable of meeting the needs of the population for high-quality health services; to advocate for the introduction of organizational culture and working methods that reduce harm to patients; to create the necessary infrastructure for training and learning; to provide technical support and manage information bases for quality improvement. These requirements determine the need for healthcare professionals to have continuous professional development and increase their knowledge of quality assurance.

An analysis of the national legal framework for ensuring the quality of healthcare services shows the importance of this issue and its regulation by a number of legal acts. For example, Article 16 of the Law of Ukraine "Fundamentals of the Legislation of Ukraine on Healthcare" stipulates that the network of state and municipal healthcare institutions is formed taking into account the development plans of hospital districts, the needs of the population in healthcare, the need to ensure the proper quality of such services, timeliness, accessibility to citizens, and the efficient use of material, labor and financial resources [23].

Back in 2011, the Concept of Healthcare Quality Management in Ukraine for the period up to 2020 was approved [24]. A number of sectoral orders approved the Procedure for controlling the quality of medical care; organization of clinical expert assessment of the quality of medical care; monitoring of clinical indicators of the quality of medical care; Sectoral programme for standardization of medical care for the period up to 2020; creation and implementation of medical and technological documents for standardization of medical care, creation of a formulary system for the provision of medicines to healthcare facilities, the Procedure for monitoring compliance with the Licensing Conditions for Medical Business Activities etc. [25-32].

One of the priority areas for ensuring the quality of medical care in the healthcare sector is the creation of programmes for continuous improvement of the quality of medical care, which are applied at various levels of healthcare and involve different categories of medical professionals; development and implementation of measures to train healthcare professionals in the field of quality management of medical care.

A sociological study was carried out among health care workers using an anonymous questionnaire to clarify the problems of identifying the educational needs of health care providers in relation to the quality of health care. Its results established the relevance of the issues of ensuring the quality of medical care and patient safety and the importance of paying due attention to these issues in the work of the

institution. On a five-point scale, healthcare professionals rated the results of implementing JCI requirements in a healthcare facility at (hereinafter – mean ± standard error of the mean) 4,3±0,07 points, the state of information about current operational processes, changes, plans etc. at 4,4±0,06 points, the clarity and comprehensibility of quality assurance tasks at 4,5±0,04 points, the method of control at 4,6±0,05 points, and the attitude of direct management at 4,6±0,05 points (Fig. 1).

The study found a significant commitment of medical personnel to patient safety activities (3,95±0,10 points on a five-point scale), openness to discussing problems of quality of care and patient safety (4,03±0,10), ways to improve them (4,1±0,09), and the creation of an environment in the healthcare facility that promotes quality of care and patient safety (3,7±0,11).

There is a high need for further continuous improvement of quality assurance activities. Healthcare professionals supported the implementation of measures to improve their knowledge and competencies in healthcare quality assessment, quality assurance and quality management. It was found that the vast majority of respondents ([hereinafter – rate ± standard error] 91,9±2,90 per 100 respondents) consider the existing level of knowledge on healthcare quality to be sufficient; only a few answers were related to its insufficiency or problems with its definition.

At the same time, 88,4±2,30 per 100 respondents indicated the need to improve their knowledge on healthcare quality in the context of continuous professional development. The overwhelming majority of respondents expressed a desire to deepen their theoretical training on modern strategies for ensuring the quality of healthcare services; regulatory and legal regulation of healthcare quality control; conceptual models of healthcare quality assurance; accreditation of healthcare facilities; licensing of medical practice; legal basis of standardization; examination of the volume and quality of medical services; assessment of medical technologies; development of clinical pathways for patients; patient safety; quality management; continuous improvement of the quality of service; international experience and national strategies for ensuring the quality of medical care etc.

The overwhelming majority of respondents indicated full-time training at the in-service training courses as a priority form of professional development (42,4±3,50 per 100 respondents). Moreover, remote on-the-job training courses (33,3±3,30 per 100 respondents), trainings, and webinars were also mentioned as desirable forms of training. The sociological survey showed the prospects of conducting training activities in healthcare facilities to meet the educational needs of healthcare professionals.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the results obtained in the course of the study demonstrates the importance of ensuring the quality of medical care by providing it with adequate resources through improving the competence of medical professionals in this area. A number of strategic and programme documents at the international level emphasize the relevance of ensuring the quality of human resources in healthcare as a prerequisite for achieving high quality of medical care for patients. These priorities are emphasized in the WHO Guidelines for National Quality Policy and Strategy [3]. The WHO Guidelines for National Quality Policies and Strategies emphasize the need to train service providers in patient empowerment, concepts, principles and skills to ensure quality of medical care.

Informing and training of health workers is considered as one of the areas of work of stakeholders interested in

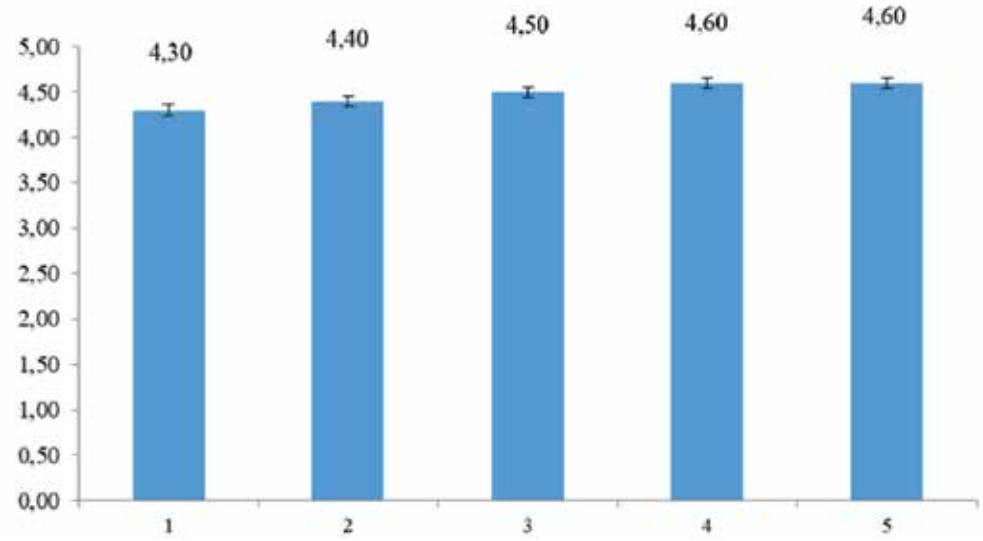


Fig.1. Assessment by of health care providers of various quality of care aspects (on a 5-point scale [mean ± standard error of the mean]): 1 – results from the implementation of JCI requirements; 2 – the state of information about current operational processes, changes, plans etc.; 3 – clarity and comprehensibility of quality assurance tasks; 4 – control method; 5 – attitude of direct management.

improving the quality of health care in the WHO documents "Delivering Quality Health Services: a Global Imperative for Universal Health Coverage" [4], "Quality Health Services: a Planning Guide" [17], "Five Functions to Improve Quality of Care for Maternal Newborn and Child Health" [9], "Quality of Care in Fragile, Conflict-Affected and Vulnerable Settings: Taking Action" [19], "Health Care Accreditation and Quality of Care: Exploring the Role of Accreditation and External Evaluation of Health Care Facilities and Organizations" [21], in the WHO Regional Office for Europe documents, in particular "Improving Healthcare Quality in Europe. Characteristics, Effectiveness and Implementation of Different Strategies" [22] etc. It is recommended to develop coaching and mentoring mechanisms in the course of educational activities, implement them in the activities of healthcare facilities; support healthcare providers in their workplaces to learn and share their knowledge, skills and motivation, and provide opportunities to share experiences on improving the quality of service.

Educational activities should be aimed at developing the competencies of medical personnel to provide high-quality and safe medical services and the need for continuous improvement of the quality of medical care; at creating appropriate infrastructure in healthcare facilities for training medical personnel and learning from experience; and at ensuring the continuous professional development of healthcare human resources.

In Ukraine, the regulatory framework for quality assurance of healthcare services has been formed, and the Concept of Quality Management in Healthcare and sectoral orders regulating quality assurance of healthcare are being implemented [23-32]. At the same time, the development of modern strategies and programmes and the introduction of innovations require constant attention to the issues of quality assurance, primarily to the educational aspects of personnel training and the creation of conditions for their continuous professional development in the context of healthcare quality management.

A sociological survey among healthcare providers confirmed the importance and priority of ensuring the quality of care and patient safety in the activities of healthcare professionals. On average, employees of the facility rated the results of implementing JCI requirements, activities to inform employees about current operational processes, innovations, plans, etc., the clarity and comprehensibility of the quality assurance tasks formulated by the management, the quality control method, and the attitude of the direct management towards employees from 4,3 to 4,6 points on a five-point scale. The commitment of the healthcare facility's specialists to work on patient safety, openness to discuss issues related to the quality of care and patient safety, areas for their improvement, and the development of conditions in the professional environment that contribute to improving the quality of care and patient safety were identified.

Despite the respondents' high assessment of their own knowledge and skills in healthcare quality assurance, the vast majority of healthcare professionals (88,4±2,30 per 100 respondents) reported a need to improve their competencies in healthcare quality. The survey identified priority topics for advanced training of healthcare providers, which relate to various aspects of the problem of ensuring the quality of healthcare for the population. The preferred forms of educational activities within the framework of continuing professional development were also established, primarily full-time training at refresher courses and distance learning courses without interrupting production activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Improving the quality of healthcare services is seen as a priority factor in strengthening healthcare systems and improving public health, with a focus on educational aspects. However, a number of challenges remain to ensure the quality and safety of healthcare services. A sociological survey conducted at the healthcare facility revealed that healthcare providers highly appreciate the results of implementing JCI requirements, the appropriate level of employee awareness of current operational processes, changes, plans, etc., the clarity and comprehensibility of quality assurance tasks, an acceptable and effective method of quality control, and the proper attitude of management towards subordinates. The commitment of employees to quality assurance and patient safety, openness to discuss these issues and ways to solve them, and the creation of a microclimate in the facility that promotes quality of care and patient safety were confirmed. The need for healthcare professionals to improve their knowledge and acquire competencies in healthcare quality assessment, quality assurance and quality management was identified; the desired topics of the educational process and the desired forms of educational activities were determined.

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