

Navigating the Measure Jungle: NQF's Quality Positioning System Simplifies the Task

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Anyone unfamiliar with quality measurement and reporting might find the journey of self-education daunting. There are numerous organizations that develop, use, and require sets or collections of measures for reporting, and many address different measurement goals. There are varying areas of focus, many that fall into different categories, some distinct and some overlapping. Examples include patient safety, clinical quality, outcomes, evidence, patient satisfaction, and now clinical efficiency.

There are also numerous endorsed measures—over 700—and multiple versions of these same measures that have changed slightly over the years but are still in use. And there are different organizations that require measure set reports and various distinct sets of them—sometimes called “portfolios.” Finally, there are different “measure developers,” sometimes known as “stewards,” who can be either organizations or individuals. Some have copyrights to their measures to protect intellectual rights, and the use of these measures can represent revenue streams. Add the latest dimension of linking quality to reimbursement, and the aspects of revenue, care, and workflow are also intermingled.

In the past, quality measures were sometimes viewed as “standalone” indicators of how well a healthcare organization was doing with respect to care delivery. However, good patient care often has different processes for measuring, and organizations that issue lists of top performers for different activities abound. This is confusing to the public. How can there be so many “10 Best Hospitals” that are all different? Since some of these measures are based on objective measurement and others contain subjective or overlapping variables, one can see how a Rubik’s cube can evolve.

At many healthcare organizations, the integration of various functional departments only come together at the board or executive levels. Staffers, in their respective departments, can have only a vague idea about how their specific function contributes to the overall running and positioning of the organization. These days, with the industry linking care delivery to revenue and revenue to safety, satisfaction, and compliance, the days of units operating in silos is fading. It is making way for the new healthcare organization, with staff professionals who have a breadth of cross-functional awareness regardless of the department to which they are assigned.

This article offers an introductory, general, and brief overview of the many different quality measures and quality measure organizations in existence today. These measures are manageable due to the National Quality Forum (NQF), the one organization trying to sort through them all. A free online NQF tool, the Quality Positioning System (QPS), helps providers and interested parties sort through the quality measure overload.

National Quality Forum's Role in Measures

The National Quality Forum (NQF) is a nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC, that is dedicated to improving the quality of healthcare in the United States. To that end, the NQF embodies a three-part mission—to set goals for performance improvement, to endorse standards for measuring and reporting on performance, and to promote educational and outreach programs. NQF members include purchasers, physicians, nurses, hospitals, certification bodies, and fellow quality improvement organizations.

The NQF has a number of different initiatives to consistently address and align quality measures. Notable NQF projects include eMeasures, the Measure Authoring Tool (MAT), the Quality Data Model (QDM), and the Measures Application Partnership (MAP).

The alignment effort is significant and has many activities, but one that stands out is the creation and public availability of the Quality Positioning System tool (QPS). NQF allows users of its free website to use QPS to look at existing portfolios (or create one's own) and compare them to the portfolios of other organizations, hospitals, government agencies, consumer organizations, and other industries across the country.

A Tool to Measure Measures

As the NQF website describes the tool, QPS is useful for measurement and reporting needs. QPS Version 1.0 was launched in October 2012. This tool could be used by anyone with an interest in finding and comparing quality measures. One can list and compare Beacon measures alongside those associated with the "meaningful use" EHR Incentive Program, public measures against private, Joint Commission against state, and PQRS against hospital. In short, any combination of endorsed measures from any of the major entities that use and create measures can be compared side by side with QPS.

To find NQF-endorsed measures, a tool user can search for measures by title, NQF measure number, key search term, or by selecting various categories such as care setting and data source. QPS provides information about a measure, including its description, numerator and denominator statements, steward contact information, and historical changes.

Another way to search is by measure steward. QPS allows a user to search measures by the organization that maintains the measure. Users type the steward name into the search box from the home page, or use the blue "Measure Steward" filter box from within QPS to search by one or more stewards. The tool allows export of search results and portfolios. A user can export measure search results and the measures within a portfolio.

Users can create custom lists as well as their own measures. This function allows users to create custom lists of NQF-endorsed measures that fit specific interests or needs. Once a portfolio is created, users can be automatically notified when there are changes to any of the measures they listed. Portfolios can be kept private, shared directly with others, or made public. One can compare portfolios to see which NQF-endorsed measures satisfy the requirements of one or more reporting or payment programs as well.

This is important to healthcare professionals in charge of managing quality measures, because rather than setting one standard to which everyone compares, it recognizes differences in motivation and value. Healthcare organizations, the providers in them, and the patients that use them have different goals and definitions of good care. Some are related to revenue, some to safety, some to best practices in specific disease categories, and others to public guidelines or private initiatives.

NQF allows users to become engaged in the measure endorsement process if they choose. In the Measure Status section on a measure's page, a link provides access to the associated NQF project so one can track upcoming activities. It is also possible to submit comments about a measure, such as experience using it, questions, or requesting an ad-hoc review.

Staying on top of quality measure reporting, calculating, and processing is a good differentiator for HIM professionals. Knowing QPS is one of the many skills available to the health information management profession. Adding this knowledge to the HIM professional's portfolio will improve the odds for achieving career payback and return on investment in health information systems.

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