

Quality Assurance Activities

What is Quality Assurance (QA)?

An activity where the primary purpose is to monitor or improve the quality of service delivered by an institution is a Quality Assurance (QA) activity. QA activities are often called 'quality improvement' or 'clinical audit'.

QA activities involve the systematic evaluation of health care practices in order to improve patient care. This is usually achieved by analysing routinely obtained data to capture current practice and comparing this to existing best practice standards. QA activities do not involve extra interventions or clinical assessments.

QA activities ask whether we are doing the things we have agreed we should be doing or achieving the outcomes we have agreed we should be achieving.

Types of QA activities can include:

Clinical Audit:	A quality improvement process that seeks to improve patient care and outcomes through systematic review of care against explicit standards and the implementation of changes in practice if needed.
Practice Review:	The systematic assessment of current practice, without comparison against set criteria or of one therapy against another and may also be known as a baseline assessment.
Satisfaction/Knowledge Survey:	The systematic collection of data from a sample of patients or staff to determine levels of satisfaction or knowledge about a service.
Service Improvement:	Implementing an initiative to promote change or maintain good practice in order to enhance care and may be known as practice development.
Program Evaluation:	Evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of information about a specific program or intervention in order to allow its critical appraisal.

EMHS Research Hub

Email: EMHS.REG@health.wa.gov.au

Web: www.emhs.health.wa.gov.au/research



Approval to conduct a QA project

QA projects must obtain all necessary institutional approvals prior to starting, but do not require approval from a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). While QA activities typically involve minimal risk, they must still be conducted in a way that is ethical. Staff conducting the activity should consider whether the people involved (patients or staff) will be exposed to any harm, how consent will be obtained (if applicable) and privacy protected. Staff should explicitly identify ethical issues arising and include a plan to manage them in the QA protocol.

For further information about conducting QA activities within EMHS, including registering activities, obtaining approval to conduct a QA project, or approval to publish, please refer to your relevant institutional safety and quality office:

Armadale Kalamunda Group	Safety, Quality, Education and Innovation (08) 9391 2526
Royal Perth Bentley Group	Clinical Safety & Quality Unit (08) 08 9224 2238

Publishing QA findings

QA projects are generally in-house activities that aim to determine if a particular treatment or procedure at an institution is meeting expected standards. If deficiencies are detected changes might be made to clinical practice, local guidelines updated or staff training provided. QA findings are typically specific to the institution in which the activity was conducted and so the results are usually only disseminated within that institution or health service.

Data from a QA project may be published more broadly (i.e. in a peer-reviewed journal) if the findings of the activity have broader ramifications/benefits for the community outside the institution. In these instances, approval must be sought from the institution in which the QA was undertaken. Journals may require a letter stating that the project did not require approval from a research ethics committee. Letters to this effect can be obtained by contacting the hospital's Safety and Quality Office in which the QA activity took place.

QA versus research projects

It is important to distinguish QA activities from research as this will determine the avenue of review and approval required. If a project is classified as research it must be reviewed by a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), or alternative low-risk review process established by the HREC. If a project is QA it is reviewed by the Hospital's Safety and Quality Office.

Research is a systematic investigation which aims to generate new knowledge about what works and what doesn't. In medicine, research provides the foundations for agreement about the kind of clinical treatment and care we should be providing, *ultimately defining or re-defining best practice*.

Research is about discovering the right thing to do;

Quality Assurance is about ensuring it is done right.

Confusion can arise because QA activities often use the same methods as research studies such as rigorous design, data collection and analysis and the measurement of health outcomes. A research study might compare the outcomes of two types of surgical intervention to determine which represents best practice. A QA project in the same area might review very similar data but with the aim of determining if the implementation of one or both of those surgical methods is producing the expected outcomes based on previously published research data.

Projects are research studies when any of the following is true:

- Where the activity potentially infringes the privacy or professional reputation of participants, providers or organisations.
- Secondary use of data - using data or analysis from QA or evaluation activities for another purpose.
- Gathering information about the participant beyond that which is collected routinely. Information may include biospecimens or additional investigations.
- Testing of non-standard (innovative) protocols or equipment.
- Comparison of cohorts.
- Randomisation or the use of control groups or placebos.
- Targeted analysis of data involving minority/vulnerable groups whose data is to be separated out of that data collected or analysed as part of the main QA/evaluation activity.
- Where data is being provided to external organisations.

If there is any doubt as to whether the project is QA or research, please contact the EMHS Research Hub on 9224 2260 or at EMHS.REG@health.wa.gov.au