

Reducing Waste

What does it mean to healthcare?

Why this is important

Waste is detrimental to all business; in healthcare it can occasionally be life-threatening.

All organisations have waste - wasteful activity, wasted resources, wasted money, wasted effort, it's not designed in – who would deliberately do that? Organisations are complex entities with even more complex attributes – people. They need to get their people organised and so develop all kinds of processes and working methods to handle and manage staff activity. And in processes waste resides.

Working processes evolve from:

- **Historical practice**
History is part of an organisations ethos and culture. Processes that evolve from history are some of the toughest to change. Ask staff why they do something in a particular way and they might reply “Because we do, because we always have.” That's a process that will most likely have wasted steps resulting in wasted time, effort and money.
- **Growth or change**
Growth or change is an inevitable change agent. Strategic re-configurations and mergers bring organisations, people and processes together. Process complexities grow; often for the best of reasons, to meet demand, to accommodate new ways of working and to achieve cohesion as soon as possible. However, growth or change plans rarely include time to review the whole organisation, to map and understand all the processes that will become joined up and integral to future success.
- **Events**
When something untoward occurs there is, rightly, a scramble to make sure that the same thing doesn't happen again. Until recently there has been little analysis of why an event occurred (thankfully this is becoming increasingly rare in healthcare, due to the advent of clinical governance and the attendant root cause analysis response to such occurrences). When responding to an event new process steps may be added in, new measures established but a whole-sale review of the process and the other processes it affects or impacts remains relatively infrequent. Adding to a process won't fix a problem; it might make it slightly less likely to happen or, worse still, mask it.

Model for success

WCI draws on cross-industry best practice from industries such as pharmaceuticals, aerospace & defence to deliver successful solutions to healthcare organisations. Our success is demonstrated by combining 20 years experience of defining value streams within complex industries, with an 18 year history of working with NHS partners.

Banishing waste requires a new mind-set, a radical mind-set that will allow a healthcare organisation to take a critical look at what it does and to embrace the need to change. Lean thinking concerns itself with reducing waste, making sure that every step in a process adds value to the recipient (patient, doctor, social carer, colleague) and enabling those who know the processes well (the employees) to make the changes that will delivery sustainable waste reduction.

Make no mistake, Lean is hard work and does not deliver huge results overnight but big benefits are attainable and along the way incremental improvements do make a difference.

Reducing Waste

Waste in organisations can be grouped into 7 categories and applied to examples in healthcare:

Waste Category	Examples
Over-production	Repeating previous work; asking patients the same questions another clinician has already asked; re-entering patient details into another computer system, repeating tests and examinations
Waiting	Any wait for results, patients waiting, clinical staff waiting, operating lists not starting on schedule
Transportation and movement	Moving patients, specimens ... unnecessarily from one place to another
Inventory	Poor stock control that has large amounts of stock or the wrong items in store. Worst: Out of date stock!
Motion	Staff moving around, not having the right equipment in the right place at the right time. Having to concede work-a-rounds
Over-processing	Gathering information that's not necessary, ordering and completing inappropriate tests
Defective production	Work errors; no consent form signed by the patient, pathology not ordered, TTOs not dispensed correctly

Benefits

Lean thinking supports healthcare organisations work towards meeting Standards for Better Health. Although aimed at NHS Trusts, many independent healthcare providers have also adopted the Standards as a way of demonstrating their commitment to the provision of quality care.

Meeting the Standards has not been an easy task. The Health Commission's Annual Health Check, 2005-06 has demonstrated that, with half of Trusts noting that their quality and resource use is fair or weak. Lean thinking can help address this and be used as part of a Trusts overall strategy for meeting the Standards and securing significantly better assessment scores for 2006-07 and 2007-08.

Proof of Solution

For healthcare organisations that need to reduce waste and improve patient care, WCI applies Lean thinking through a proven set of principles and tools. Money and resources then become available for drugs, dressings, clinicians, technology, new evidence-based treatments, better admission planning, better discharge planning, shorter patient stays, improved patient experience and for the NHS, a balanced budget. Our methodology for Lean thinking includes steps that:

1. Identifies what value has to be delivered to the customer (be that a patient, a doctor or another department)
2. Maps the current workflow processes and determines what the value stream looks like
3. Identifies what wasteful steps and where failure may occur in the processes
4. Enables a future state to be planned, a state that eliminates waste and enhances each value-adding step in a process

These steps and the planning for an evolution or step change in processes, will allow efficiencies to be gained, staff will be focused on meaningful activities and the patient experience will improve. Significantly it will also mean that time and money lost through wasteful processes will be channelled into increasingly effective, outcome and benefit-focused healthcare.

