QUALITY INITIATIVES:

BUILDING A CONSISTENT AND EFFECTIVE QAPI PROGRAM

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The healthcare industry's movement to value-based care has led to a quality renaissance across several areas of healthcare. For nursing homes, that renaissance is known as Quality Assurance Performance Improvement (QAPI). Quality has long been an area of focus in nursing home care. However, the effectiveness of quality initiatives has often come into question. To improve care quality in nursing homes – and quality of life for residents – the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS) is expanding quality provisions by pairing quality assurance with performance improvement. Essentially this means that nursing homes must now work to put processes in place that enable them to identify the root causes of problems, and then prevent those issues from happening in the future.

The purpose of adding performance improvement to existing quality assurance requirements – and a primary goal of QAPI – is to push for excellence in nursing home care. While it is easy to get on board with this goal, nursing homes have a lot of work to do to make the vision a reality. QAPI compliance means a complete cultural transformation for nursing homes. This whitepaper looks at the impact of QAPI on nursing homes, challenges related to QAPI, and actions facilities must take to adapt to QAPI-driven changes in order to be successful.

QAPI BASICS

The QAPI rulebook contains hundreds of pages of detailed information and requirements. QAPI in its entirety can be overwhelming, but breaking it down makes it more manageable. Below are some basic points nursing homes need to know about QAPI:

- QAPI applies to all certified nursing facilities that receive federal funding – this is roughly half of all nursing homes in the United States.
- To comply with QAPI requirements, nursing homes must form an internal dedicated QAPI team.
- Facilities must develop, implement and maintain an effective QAPI program.
- Each facility's QAPI program needs to be data-driven and include performance improvement projects related to its unique service offerings.
- Documentation of QAPI efforts must be provided to surveyors.

After years of waiting and listening to talk about pending QAPI regulation, it is finally time for nursing homes to shift into action. The timeline for QAPI implementation was laid out in three parts:

PHASE 1 – IDENTIFYING A QAPI COMMITTEE (DEADLINE: NOVEMBER 28, 2016)

PHASE 2 – WRITING A QAPI PLAN (DEADLINE: NOVEMBER 28, 2017)

PHASE 3 – COMPLETED IMPLEMENTATION OF QAPI PLAN (DEADLINE: NOVEMBER 28, 2019)

By now, all nursing homes should have identified their QAPI committee, and they should be advancing to the later stages of QAPI implementation. However, a lot of facilities are running into obstacles as they try to figure out how to apply QAPI inside of their organization.

THE FOLLOWING OUTLINES STEPS IN PRIMARIS' RECOMMENDED QAPI IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS ONCE YOU HAVE YOUR COMMITTEE IN PLACE:

Perform a quality assessment – Knowing where to start is half the battle when it comes to putting successful QAPI plans in place. The best way to determine what areas to focus on is to conduct a comprehensive quality assessment. A performance assessment allows nursing homes to identify areas of opportunity and gain insights to guide QAPI efforts.

Conduct a data review – Quality improvement must be driven by data. By performing a diligent data review, a nursing home can learn about the challenges that impact its facility and residents, and also uncover opportunities that should be QAPI focal points. Nursing homes should not only review.

Write the QAPI plan – There is flexibility when it comes to what must be included in a QAPI plan. Each facility can design its own plan based on the services it provides and the needs of residents. When writing a QAPI plan, it is important to think ahead and consider what it will take to put that plan into action.

Evaluate and train staff – Every person working inside a nursing home – from owners to direct care staff – needs to buy into QAPI efforts. Employees will need to adopt new ways of doing things as a facility converts to QAPI. It is necessary to determine what knowledge and experience gaps there are, and also what training is needed in order to implement new processes and procedures. Then, staff should be given the appropriate training.

Develop PIPS – Performance Improvement Projects (or PIPS) are the very specific plans that target precise issues nursing homes want to improve. Facilities need to use data strategically to develop solutions to issues that impact portions of care or the entire nursing home.

Evaluate performance – Regular performance evaluations should be part of all quality assurance efforts, and they are particularly important for understanding how well QAPI planning and execution is working. Nursing homes need to conduct comprehensive performance evaluations to learn how the changes they have made are impacting care and resident quality of life, and to determine what additional adjustments might be required to make QAPI implementation successful.

Now that a timeline and QAPI requirements have been cemented by CMS, it is time for nursing homes to get to work planning and implementing their QAPI programs. Nursing homes can perform the above actions on their own, but many find they need support from a consultant to help them through the process.
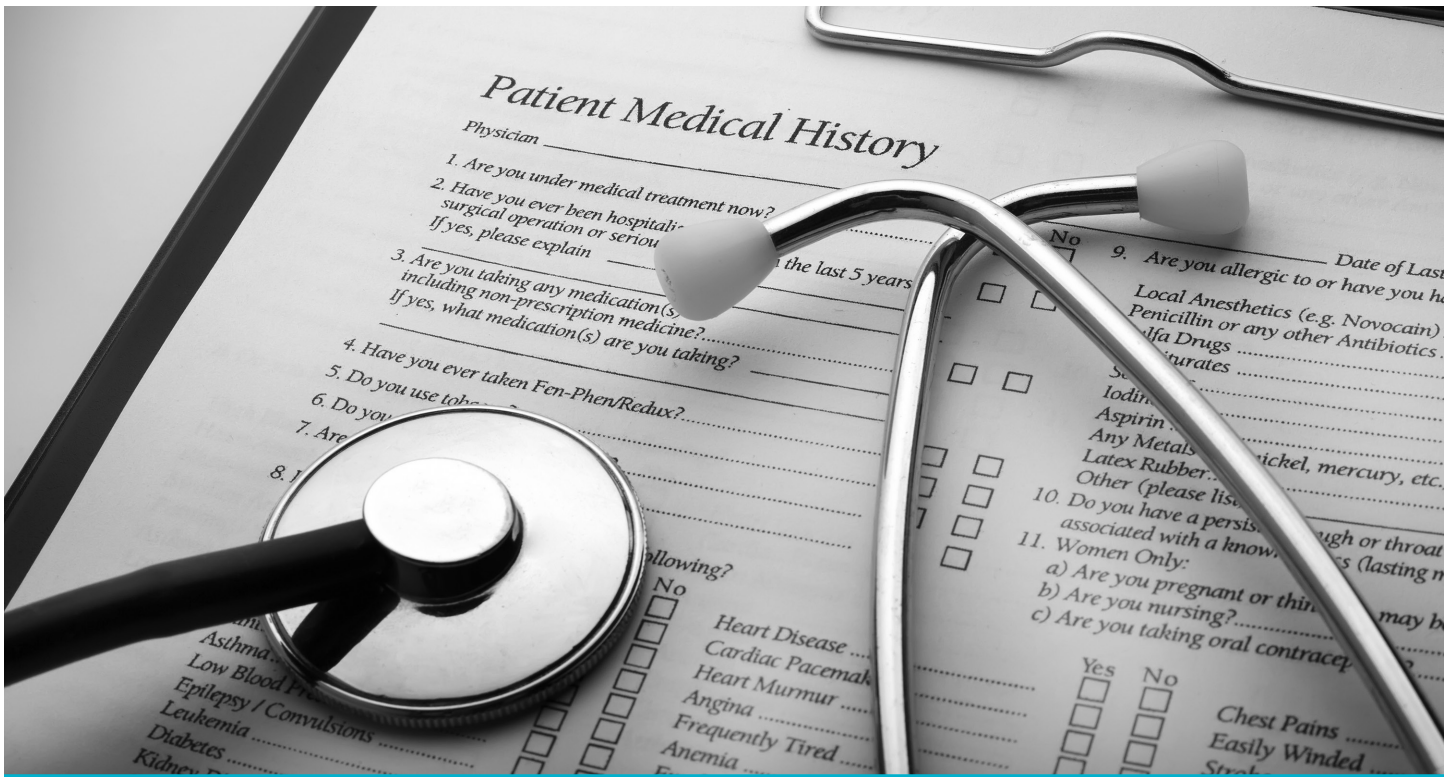
CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

When done right, QAPI involves systemic change at every level across a nursing facility. Change of this magnitude requires a lot of time for planning, training staff, evaluating progress and so on. Because it is such a big undertaking, and teams are learning as they go, every nursing home should expect to face challenges as they plan and implement QAPI.

One obvious challenge is simply the lack of experience nursing homes have with QAPI. Many teams do not know where to begin when building a QAPI program. And even after taking the first few steps, there are still a lot of questions that need to be answered about how to make quality improvement ongoing. A nursing home will only go through the process of rolling out QAPI once, so building on past experience is not an option. This is a main reason why nursing homes may want to consider working with a consultant, like Primaris, that has experience designing and executing QAPI programs. Quality improvement companies that deal with QAPI on a daily basis can provide resources, guidance and even complete full-service QAPI program development. For nursing homes that do not have extensive knowledge of how to approach QAPI, finding a QAPI partner is a good option.

Maintaining consistent staffing is also a struggle for many nursing homes. In settings where turnover is common, it is helpful to have support from an outside partner that can ensure QAPI efforts receive a steady stream of attention.

QAPI is more than a plan. It is a complete culture change. It truly takes a constant focus on quality and improvement. If a facility's internal team cannot make that happen, then working with an outside partner that is dedicated to QAPI may be ideal the solution.

BENEFITS AND PAYOFFS

While there are a healthy number of QAPI challenges to overcome, the benefits of a successful QAPI program are plentiful. For example, following QAPI guidelines and generating ongoing improvement can lead to less stress when it is time for surveyors to inspect facilities. Every nursing home wants to avoid citations, and a well-oiled QAPI program makes that possible through quality improvement projects and having solid systems in place. Along with fewer citations come more opportunities to achieve a coveted five-star rating. These two things by themselves can pay off big for nursing homes.

Another benefit of a successful QAPI program is fewer hospitalizations. By improving care, nursing homes can reduce the need for acute care among residents. Not only is this good for residents, but it allows nursing homes to keep more care in-house, which means more reimbursements and financial benefits.

Another benefit to recognize is the positive impact quality improvement has on staff. Optimizing care delivery makes providing quality care easier for direct care staff. So, converting to QAPI can mean that staff is happier and more satisfied, and possibly reduce turnover.

These benefits are just the tip of the iceberg. A successful QAPI program can lead to many other small and large benefits for nursing homes, their staff, and residents.

ONGOING IMPROVEMENT

One of the most important things for nursing homes to recognize is that simply writing a QAPI plan does not lead to long-term quality improvement. The plan itself is important, but the actions taken to carry out the plan will determine how successful QAPI is ultimately.

QAPI is a permanent change to how care is delivered. Nursing homes that are not comfortable in their ability and knowledge of how to make that complete change should seek support from a quality improvement partner so they can transform their facility and achieve ongoing improvement.

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Primaris has more than 30 years of experience advising healthcare organizations on how to improve quality, patient safety and clinical outcomes. Contact us to learn more.

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