

**Measuring the quality of hospital care:
The state of art – What information should be delivered to the public?**

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ABSTRACT

The quality of hospital care has become a focal point in the regulation of health systems. This can be put down to several factors: the funding crisis, greater public demands on healthcare professionals owing in part to the wider availability of health-related information, and finally the development of new data-processing technologies. This combination of factors has caused the medical profession's monopoly to be called into question and prompted calls for the development of external schemes to monitor, and even control, service provision.

The effect of these demands has been the emergence of a new field of research into public health focusing on the measurement of healthcare quality, in particular outcomes, and initiatives by payers or government agencies aimed at making outcome measurement an integral feature of hospital resource allocation. At the same time, those same players and the popular press have been providing the public with "league tables" comparing hospitals on the basis of selected indicators. The nature and quality of these initiatives vary substantially across OECD countries. The United States, with its competition-led healthcare system, has been at the forefront in both methodological research and the introduction of external control schemes. In the European and other OECD Member countries the publication of similar research has taken longer, partly for political reasons but also because of delays in computerisation.

The aim of this paper is to gain insight from experiments conducted in a selection of countries. It addresses two points in greater depth. First, it reviews the state of the art regarding methods of measuring healthcare quality and outcomes, the main emphasis being on the measurement of hospital-care quality in terms of either clinical outcomes or health status. The paper is confined to the acute sector. Second, it analyses the use made of these methods by external institutions –payers, government agencies and the popular press– looking at why and how they are used, the problems encountered, and finally how they are currently assessed and what recommendations can be derived from them.