

Research Note: Industry-wide Improvements can be Driven by Benchmarking

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As an industry that serves some of the most vulnerable people in our society, aged care takes seriously its collective responsibility for ensuring that the services delivered are effective and continually improving. Improvement in this context goes beyond self-monitoring over time, an approach which may not show crucial interpretive points eg. resident dependency, contextual data, seasonal effects, changes in resident profile over time and between audits. While internal monitoring of performance is essential to good management, gains across the industry on any indicator of quality performance can be best appreciated through the processes of benchmarking.

Since 2000 over 500 providers have been contributing to a database of key care and management outcomes which contains the proof of industry-wide improvements. Access to this comprehensive database was granted to an independent research team at ACU National and CSIRO by QPS Benchmarking and analysis has revealed encouraging results in terms of resident outcomes as a result of informed management strategies and approaches to resident care.

Industry wide improvements have been identified from the database which represents around 12% of aged care providers across Australia. In terms of resident care and treatment, the rate of pressure areas in high care has reduced from an industry average of 10.0% in 2002-03 to 4.2% in 2005-06. The incidence of self reported medication errors has increased from 32.6% in 2002-03 to 53.5% in 2005-06 reflecting an improving culture of awareness of medication administration issues and a commitment to improvement.

While it is likely that voluntary participation in this performance benchmarking system can be taken as an indicator of commitment by these aged care services, to practise improvement in their own organisation as well as to improvements to industry overall, industry-wide interest in quality care improvement approaches has also grown over the last few years.

Management practice benefits from industry benchmarking. These benefits appear against indicators such as staff accidents per hour of work which has reduced from 0.38 to 0.26 since 2000. Hospital transfers as a percentage of total residents has also fallen from 23% in 2001 to 10% in 2006.

Credit for these results belongs also to staff employed by aged care services. Competency testing of staff across high and low care service areas shows that from an average score on all competency tests has increased from 83.5% 2001 to 87.3% in 2006. Equally, the trend in absenteeism across the three years 2003 – 2006 shows a 12% drop across the industry, that is, from a high of 4.75% in 2003 to 4.18% in 2006.

The benefits of industry benchmarking to managers of aged care services lie in having ready access to accurate information that takes into account any variables that confound analysis, and they can immediately see how their operation is travelling over time and how their performance relates to comparative services.

With this information providers can implement strategies to obviate the effects of downward trends and take steps to safeguard their service against trend drivers. For example

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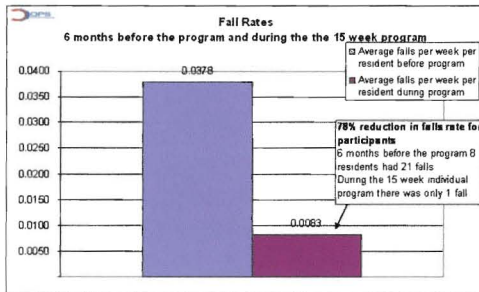
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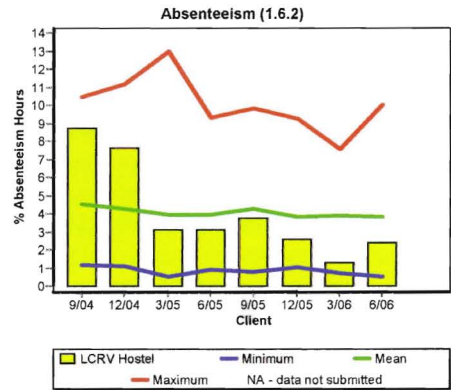
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The graph below shows improvement within a particular service which was concerned about the rates of resident falls. Using benchmarked feedback they were able to implement a 15 week falls prevention program with dramatic effect.



As you can see the average falls per week were able to be reduced by 78%. In the six months prior to the management strategy 21 residents fell, whereas with staff awareness and skills development, only one fall occurred during the following fifteen week period.

In another case an organisation through a series of strategies over an 18 month period has made dramatic improvements to its absenteeism rate. See graph opposite.



Report for: All Low Care <Aust>
 From Quarter 1 2004/2005 To Quarter 4 2005/2006

As further analysis of the database progresses, it is envisaged that useful information will be made generally available to the aged care industry which will support aged care managers keen to understand how well they are performing. Aged care providers' commitment to quality management reflects a culture of quality where voluntary monitoring of performance indicators enables strategies to be put in place to address impending declines in performance.

Risk Management Tips from Gow-Gates Insurance Brokers

In this regular feature we will deliver short examples of insurance claims and risk management tips.

Several fires have occurred recently at aged care facilities as a result of overheating wheat sacks. Wheat sacks are those little bags that, after heating, are used for sore necks and shoulders. The contents are generally wheat and sometimes include lavender for scent. Often well-intentioned family will give them to residents as presents. According

to the accompanying instructions, the bags are to be heated in a microwave oven. In some situations residents have overheated the bags causing them to catch on fire with the fire quickly spreading to surrounding contents and buildings.

The risk management tip is quite simple and that is to ban the use of wheat packs. Instructions for their ban should be included in all residents' and family information packages.