
Quality Qorner

The Quality Journey

Recently I heard a presentation by Sister Mary Jean Ryan, representing the nation's first organization to win the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for health care in 2002. Sister Mary Jean is the CEO of the Sisters of Saint Mary's Health Care (SSMHC), with 20 acute care hospitals and 3 nursing homes across Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Oklahoma.

As a condition of the Baldrige Quality Award, winning institutions must provide presentations and visits to other organizations that want to know how to achieve higher levels of quality in their own facilities. Baldrige award institutional representatives travel around the country for a few years after winning the award as keynote speakers at numerous conferences and professional meetings, explaining how they integrated the "Criteria For Performance Excellence" into their routine operations. Sister Mary Jean offered such a presentation at the American Society for Quality's (ASQ) Quality Management Division-Health Care Division 2005 annual meeting.

A woman of petite stature and soft voice, Sister Mary Jean packed a wallop of a punch in her talk. She presented the 3 phases of their organization's quality journey over the past decade, explaining that it was this "journey," not any particular program, that led to SSMHC's ability to win the award. These phases are important because they can apply to a single service of a health care system, such as a laboratory, as well as to an entire organization. She labeled phases of their journey *The Awakening*, *The Learning*, and *The Transformation*. I'd like to share with you what I learned from her presentation and show you the connection of such a journey to quality laboratory services.

The Awakening: Sister Mary Jean described "awakening" as when you get the feeling that things aren't as good as they should be. Something is missing; there is no real improvement. Patients still fall, medication errors still occur, samples still go missing, and reports are still late. Short-lived, quick-fix quality activities are frequently trotted out and are often disregarded as the "flavor of the month."

Does this sound familiar? Did your laboratory have the same deficiencies most recently as on previous inspections? Does your laboratory experience recurring incidents with unlabeled samples, lost reports, and late results? Do the staff members just go through the motions because nothing ever really gets better and they've given up caring? Do you implement a "corrective action" only to have the same or a similar problem recur? Has your laboratory or hospital completed a Six Sigma project and now you're on to some other "magic bullet" like 5S or Lean? Are you still doing QC/QA just because you have to?

In my travels and meetings, I've noticed that many laboratories are awakening to that same awareness that their quality and patient safety performance isn't all it should be. Laboratories that are truly awake have moved on to the next phase of the journey. Sadly, too many laboratories are still searching for the next cup of coffee to get them going.

The Learning: Next, Sister Mary Jean explained that SSMHC regarded the Baldrige health care criteria as an opportunity to learn more of what truly makes a difference in quality and patient safety. She explained that the Baldrige criteria gave them the "framework,

focus, and discipline" to journey deeper into learning. She further described the Baldrige criteria as "a new lens through which to view the organization and the links between its complex processes."

Wait! I'm *not* suggesting that laboratories run right out and tackle the Baldrige health care criteria! There's a more fundamental learning opportunity specific for laboratories, that provides the "framework and focus" for the laboratory's work. It's the quality management system model, guidelines, and standards published by the CLSI and the AABB. Then, "discipline" develops when a laboratory *chooses* to learn about the Quality System Essentials (QSEs) and *understands* and *uses* all the opportunities provided in a full quality toolbox. Finally, the "new lens" is laboratory management's crystal clear understanding that management policies, processes, and procedures support the proper functioning of the laboratory's technical processes and procedures.

The Transformation: According to Sister Mary Jean, it was the transformation of the organization's culture that influenced the most important improvements in quality and patient safety. Crucial was embracing the concept that "science can only serve when science is transformed into acts of heart."

She described leadership as "the day-by-day actions of each person" and leaders as those who "extend themselves to others, who see things to be done and do them, who are accountable and hold others to it, who own their work, and who create a climate where each person can thrive." Each person is a leader of his or her own self-determination.

Transforming the laboratory means changing its culture into one where employees see themselves as self-determined leaders. Transformation is turning the learning into action—action with "heart." It means fostering and supporting a laboratory culture where the staff truly understand the work processes and their important roles in them, where staff members are listened to concerning problems and how they might be solved. Transformation is about implementing a quality management system for the laboratory because it is the most efficient and effective means to improve quality and patient safety.

Dr. Ray Gambino, a pathologist well-known for his laboratory quality assurance workshops in the 1990s, used to say that "Quality is a journey, not a destination." Sister Mary Jean Ryan has nicely described her organization's journey. Your laboratory doesn't have to win the Baldrige Award, but are you at least awake enough to get on the path?

This Month's Quality Quote:

"We will not improve until we choose to improve."

Is anybody out there?

Comments? Questions?

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