

LEAN Healthcare: A Physician's Perspective



By Charles Hagood & Scott Jordan, M.D.

Today's healthcare industry faces tremendous challenges—an unprecedented nursing shortage, increasing interference from insurers, heavy financial pressures, and mounting patient frustration, to name a few. Savvy hospital administrators are increasingly turning to LEAN Healthcare for assistance with these challenges. LEAN Healthcare is an innovative methodology that emphasizes elimination of non-value-added processes. Designed in the 1980s for manufacturing applications, using the Toyota Production System as its foundation, LEAN has spread to the financial and healthcare sectors because of its outstanding effectiveness.

LEAN relies on a variety of tools to streamline all aspects of hospital operations, with the ultimate goal of increasing the amount of time available for direct patient care and improving the overall quality of care and services provided. Depending on the area of implementation, LEAN Healthcare may accomplish this goal by reducing patient wait times, increasing paperwork accuracy and efficiency, improving operating room turnover, or maximizing inventory control. As an added benefit, the system has broad appeal for hospital staff and patients. Administrators appreciate its money-saving potential, nurses love its emphasis on employee input and patient care, and patients enjoy the reduced wait times and increased attention from caregivers.

But what about physicians, who have their own unique concerns? From a physician's perspective, is LEAN Healthcare an effective solution, and does it have direct benefits for physicians? For family practitioner and clinic owner Dr. Scott Jordan, the answer is a resounding yes. Jordan spent several years as a materials manager in the manufacturing and Japanese automaker industry before turning to medicine. Thanks to his unusual blend of experience, he offers a unique and authoritative perspective on LEAN Healthcare's potential benefits for hospitals in general and physicians in particular, having seen LEAN firsthand in manufacturing.

As a resident, Jordan rotated through a number of hospital departments and found crippling inefficiency everywhere he turned. "This is why a lot of primary-care providers [PCPs] have stopped doing hospital work," he explains. "It's actually more efficient to see a couple of extra patients in my office each day than to deal with the inefficiencies and delays involved with driving to the hospital and searching for records, laboratory values, busy nurses, and consulting physicians." Jordan believes LEAN Healthcare is the ideal solution in such an environment. Unlike other process improvement approaches Jordan has seen and experienced in both healthcare and manufacturing, LEAN has staying power because it examines a hospital's entire value stream, not just a particular department or event. In addition, he explains, LEAN Healthcare encourages a change-friendly mindset "from the CEO down." With this mindset in place, staffs feel safe examining the workflow and suggesting improvements on an ongoing basis. The end result is a hospital that is able to maintain long-term, across-the-board improvements.

These improvements have a dramatic, positive impact on physicians' ability to care for their patients. Through current state and future state value stream analysis, process mapping, mistake-proofing, visual workplace systems, pull systems, and administrative standardization, hospitals can reduce paperwork ambiguities, errors, and processing times. A timely report, complete with clearly worded test results or diagnoses, gives a PCP like Jordan the information he needs to provide proper follow-up care. Clear, correct paperwork also aids in billing insurance companies, says Jordan, so physicians can "get paid for the work they've already done." In addition, nurses who spend less time on paperwork are more likely to be available when physicians need their assistance.

Hospitals who implement LEAN Healthcare typically see an increase in patient satisfaction, and that also benefits physicians. Inefficient hospitals frustrate patients with long wait times, difficult paperwork, cancelled procedures, and less bedside attention from caregivers. And Jordan reports that those frustrated patients don't typically complain to the hospital; they complain to him, usually at a follow-up office visit. When patients are satisfied with their hospital experience, Jordan is able to use office visits for their intended purpose and keep his appointment schedule on track.

Unfortunately, few physicians are aware of the benefits of LEAN Healthcare. Because of this lack of awareness—and their busy schedules—physicians rarely participate in LEAN implementations at the hospitals they serve. When they do participate, however, they bring valuable insights to the table and become enthusiastic participants in the LEAN system. Dr. Jordan has some sage advice for hospital administrators who want to reap the benefits of physicians' experiences and enthusiasm.

"Physicians will buy in when you make their lives easier and their patients happier," Jordan says. He points out that most physicians equate higher efficiency with simple cost-cutting, and cost-cutting alone does not help physicians accomplish their primary goal of saving lives. In fact, traditional cost cutting may work against that goal by curtailing resources needed for quality care. LEAN Healthcare, by contrast, goes beyond cost-cutting to provide all the physician-oriented benefits Jordan describes. "It increases efficiency, improves quality, decreases frustration, and removes barriers to patient care," Jordan explains. He has seen the truth of this in his own clinic, which operates under the LEAN system. Jordan's clinic and numerous LEAN hospitals make compelling examples for physicians who want hard data on the effectiveness of LEAN Healthcare. Armed with this data, administrators can bring physicians on board, and all parties involved can begin reaping the amazing benefits LEAN Healthcare provides for lasting improvements in quality and sustainable cost reductions, while creating a very satisfying experience for the patient and caregiver alike.

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