Jhpiego’s Approach to Performance and Quality Improvement—SBM-R

In many developing countries, the health infrastructure is too underdeveloped or distressed—by disease, poverty, war and other challenges—to adequately address the population’s health problems. Meaningful change may only be possible from the ground up in such settings. Women and families will not get the health care they need unless service providers working on the frontlines have tools and methods that will enable them to make decisions, solve problems and innovate at the local level. In an effort to empower these frontline workers, Jhpiego has pioneered a process to help them work together to achieve meaningful improvements in the performance and quality of the services they provide.

Standards-Based Management and Recognition (SBM-R®) is the organization’s approach to improving the performance and quality of health services. Developed in the field for the field, SBM-R is a proactive, practical management methodology that focuses not on lengthy examination of the problems, but on the streamlined standardization and implementation of best practices.

What Jhpiego Is Doing

Jhpiego, an affiliate of Johns Hopkins University, draws from more than 35 years of experience in the field to further develop and refine SBM-R. The organization’s early experiences with what would become SBM-R began in 1996 in Brazil with the PROQUALI project, which focused on improving reproductive health care. Since then, Jhpiego has implemented SBM-R in a range of technical areas—such as maternal and newborn care, infection prevention, cervical cancer prevention, and a full array of HIV/AIDS and infectious disease services. It has also been applied to functions that support sustained provision of high-quality services, such as supervision, training and education. Attesting to the inherent strengths of this approach for use in low-resource settings, SBM-R has been rolled out in at least 30 countries and taken to national scale and sustained for more than five years in Afghanistan, Malawi and Mozambique.

From Research to Practice

Building on its tradition of evidence-based health care innovation, Jhpiego designed SBM-R in such a way that it provides a clear basis for evaluating and improving the performance and quality of services—dramatically increasing an institution’s productivity, as well as a country’s ability to achieve rapid gains and long-term results. SBM-R participants are encouraged to focus on simple interventions at first (“low-hanging fruit”) in order to achieve early results.

“There is an increasing realization that sustainable changes in health services can only be achieved by strengthening the institutional systems of public and private health organizations. SBM-R is an important part of this effort. Other key components supported by Jhpiego are human resources management, supervision, leadership development, information systems, quality assurance and capacity building.”

~ Edgar Necochea
(chief innovator of SBM-R), Director, Health Systems Development, Jhpiego
This practice creates momentum for change and provides the team an opportunity to develop the change-management skills needed to address more complex problems.

In brief, the four steps of the SBM-R process are as follows:

- Setting objective performance standards for a defined service delivery process or specific content area—clear, simply worded standards with observable criteria are key to the success of SBM-R
- Implementing the standards in a streamlined, systematic way—which involves identifying gaps between actual and desired performance and devising detailed action plans to address the gaps
- Measuring progress to guide the improvement process toward these standards—such ongoing measurements can serve to motivate the group or help inform improved action plans
- Rewarding achievement of standards through social/peer recognition mechanisms—this may be a public event or ceremony including symbolic rewards (e.g., certificates, plaques)

Experience has shown that results are best when SBM-R is coupled with creative management of the change process, as well as active involvement of providers, clients and communities.

**Case Study: From the Ground Up—Strengthening Midwifery Education in Afghanistan**

In 2002, after the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan had only 467 midwives to serve a country of 21 million, and some of the highest maternal and newborn mortality rates in the world. The midwifery education system was in ruins. Working with the country’s Ministry of Public Health, under the USAID-funded REACH Program, Jhpiego and partners developed explicit educational standards of performance to be achieved by midwifery schools.

Using these standards to guide their way, faculty midwives, supervisors and students worked together to evaluate their performance, develop action plans to address identified problems, and measure and reward their progress in achieving the standards. In the first four years of this effort, 78% of Afghanistan’s midwifery schools met at least 80% of the standards and were accredited.

As of May 2009, the strengthened midwifery schools had trained 1,961 new midwives (a 420% increase), 85% of whom have been deployed to communities. And, as percentages of births attended by a midwife dramatically increase across the region (for example, 4% to 43% in Herat Province), lives are being saved.

It is in settings such as war-torn Afghanistan, where direct oversight is limited, that SBM-R shows its full potential: giving frontline workers the tools they need to act.

For reports and resources on this topic, visit the Publications/Resources section on our Web site, www.jhpiego.org.