Establishment of UK clearing house for assessing health services outcomes

Andrew F Long, Lorraine Bate, Trevor A Sheldon

The organisation and planning of health service delivery has long been dominated by concerns other than the evaluation of health services outcomes. The thrust of the Griffiths' inquiry into the management of the NHS, resulting in the 1984 reforms, was towards the achievement of greater accountability. The then Department of Health and Social Security promulgated a set of performance indicators whose predominant focus lay in resource input and cost and in the process of care, with only five indicators relating to outcome. However, the purchaser-provider split introduced from 1 April 1991, the contracting process and associated developments such as health needs assessment, together with the emphasis on health gain introduced in The Health of the Nation have pushed the assessment of health services outcomes to the centre stage of the NHS. At the same time medical audit (and more broadly - clinical audit) is being widely championed, encouraging greater awareness and focus on evaluating the process and, potentially, the outcome of care. The prospect beckons wherein purchasers, having assessed the health needs of their population, specify health (services) outcomes within contracts, thus cajoling providers to collect data on health services outcomes, although practitioners in primary health care are perhaps better placed to assess longer term outcome. Notwithstanding, it must be remembered that decision making in the organisation and planning of health services delivery is still strongly influenced by concerns other than the proved effect on a patient's health status.

Talking about health services outcomes has become topical, but progress towards measuring and using outcomes will not be straightforward. Despite the ultimate goal of the NHS of improving the health of patients it is still difficult to measure health services outcome. Indeed, there is no agreed taxonomy. This is partly due to an underdeveloped theoretical framework and a paucity of people equipped to develop, apply, and interpret outcome measures. There is potential for a rush to apply outcome measures without a critical appraisal of, for example, the dimension of outcome being measured, their underlying validity, their sensitivity to change over time, and their reliability. In addition, there are many "available" outcome measures, and potential users are often confused as to the relative merits of each and their relevance to local issues. There is also a lack of communication between clinicians, managers, planners, and researchers leading to duplication of effort, gaps in knowledge, and little dissemination to those interested parties in the wider health and social care community. Finally, and more fundamentally, there is the question of attribution — that is, is this measure really assessing outcome due to the health care intervention?

Establishing a clearing house

Against this background the Department of Health has provided funds to the school of public health at the University of Leeds, in association with the research unit of the Royal College of Physicians, to establish a centre for research and dissemination of information on outcomes assessment. The main aim of the project is to set up a national clearing house containing a central repository of information on the assessment of health services outcomes and to provide a comprehensive and accessible information and advisory service. The UK Clearing House for Information on the Assessment of Health Services Outcomes will be physically based at the Nuffield Institute at the university, which is a constituent member of the school.

The clearing house will play a crucial part in facilitating the development and application of measurement of health services outcomes by providing structured and coordinated information and advice. For the clearing house to be effective a network of experienced researchers, information scientists, and potential users must be involved in shaping its structure to lead to the creation of a national forum for the assessment of health services outcomes. As part of this initiative an advisory group to the project is being established, to include representatives from public health and general management, the Department of Health, Welsh Office, Scottish Home and Health Department, and the Northern Ireland Department of Health and Social Services.

The clearing house will adopt a broad definition of health services outcomes. Measures and studies of the effectiveness of health services interventions will be included, as well those of intermediate outcomes (for example, blood pressure in hypertension) which are known to predict people's future health status and need for health care. Patient centred outcomes, particularly measures of satisfaction with service delivery and the quality of life, will also be included. With the exception of readmission rates, process
measures of service activity such as length of stay and throughput and waiting times, which provide no direct information on patient’s health, will be excluded.

**Activities of clearing house**

One of the two components of the clearing house is an information activity. This will utilise and extend the established resources of the Information Resource Centre of the Nuffield Institute and the technical facilities of the Health Management Information Service (HELMIS). A bibliographic health services outcomes database will be developed based on journals; books and published documents on health services outcomes methods and applications; “grey” literature and details of work in progress actively sought from health, social, and educational sectors using official and non-official sources and in particular the research unit of the Royal College of Physicians. In addition, the clearing house will seek to identify statistical outcome data sets, both centrally and locally produced, recording their source within the database. It is intended to work closely with regional and district health authorities in collating information locally collected through the processes of health needs assessment and contract monitoring. The clearing house will be enhanced by an information exchange facility with the US National Centre for Health Statistics, the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, and the US Clearing House on Health Indexes.

The second component of the clearing house is a critical appraisal activity. A major project aim is to develop a systematic approach to evaluating assessment methods for health services outcomes that will be of use to those involved in appraising health service effectiveness and acceptability. Methods will be reviewed according to multiple dimensions, such as reliability, validity, sensitivity, variability, generalisability, resource implications, ease of use, comprehensibility, and organisational acceptability. A central focus will be the relevance and potential use of measures by the various levels of the health service. To disseminate this material a series of critical appraisal reports will be published. The clearing house will consequently be able to provide information and advice not only on the characteristics of the various health services outcome measures but also on their possible application and interpretation in the health services.

A quarterly newsletter and update bulletin containing selected information from the database and an outline of the content of the critical appraisal reports, will be published, initially being distributed free within the NHS. Access to the database, selective dissemination profiles, critical appraisal reports, and advice on interpreting and implementing outcomes measures will be available by subscription. In addition, subscribers will have access to a helpline, offering information on request, when this can be supplied from the database, or the names of contracts or appropriate external bodies undertaking work of a similar nature. The helpline will further act as a referral service for more extensive advice or consultancy, individuals being put in contact with appropriate staff within the clearing house or associate bodies.

Finally, a programme of seminars, workshops, and courses will be organised in order to stimulate dialogue between those working in an outcome environment. This will serve, in particular, to discuss and clarify the process of critical appraisal and conclusions on particular health services outcomes measures and to explore the concepts, methods, and potential application of the measures identified as effective and feasible. The clearing house will aim at performing a networking function, putting users of similar methods or those working in similar areas but using different measures and approaches in touch with each other.

**Conclusion**

The main aims of the clearing house can be summarised as:

- To establish a resource centre of outcomes assessment materials
- To review all collected measures critically and constructively and, when necessary, to stimulate improvements in design and field of application
- To act as a focal point for exchange of information for those working in the field
- To provide an information and advisory service on health services outcomes.

Calls for reliable, valid, and usable outcomes measures are becoming more frequent. Demand is now led by necessity as well as a desire to ensure health service effectiveness. With the bulletins on effectiveness project, funded by the Department of Health, there is considerable potential for a positive shift in focus within the health sector towards the provision of services with a beneficial outcome of care to patients. To meet the health care needs of the population the NHS must have access to systematic information on and critical appraisal of methods and measures of health services outcomes, whose attainment is the fundamental aim of the clearing house.

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It is essential that all those involved in outcomes related work, in clinical and medical audit, and in health services research more generally, register with the clearing house. Those involved in particular outcome projects are encouraged to provide details to the clearing house by completing the proforma below.

### UK Clearing House for Information on the Assessment of Health Services Outcomes: project/activity data proforma

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project title:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aims/objectives of project:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study group (for example, children, elderly, diabetic patients):</td>
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<td>Setting (inpatient, outpatient, community, general practice, social services):</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcome measures used:</td>
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<td>Project duration:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Funding source:</td>
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<td>Contact name:</td>
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The clearing house information team may contact you for further information.

Please return to:
Lorraine Bate,  
Information Resource Centre Manager,  
Nuffield Institute for Health Services Studies,  
71–75 Clarendon Road,  
Leeds LS2 9PL  
Tel 0532 459034 ext 2102; fax 0532 460899
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