

Quality Improvement Primer I

What is quality?

The answer is -- it depends! The definition varies depending on who one asks, what is important to the person who is asked, and how the person judges quality. When describing quality, some people point out characteristics, attributes or features that distinguish a product, person, or service. Some focus on the extent to which a product or service satisfies consumer needs or is free of deficiencies. Others may emphasize excellence or performance that meets or exceeds standards. In other words, people can often identify or describe quality but no standard definition exists for this term.

Are Quality Assurance, Quality Control, and Quality Improvement the same things?

Would you believe that the answer is yes and no? Quality assurance and quality control are components of quality improvement but each of these terms has a slightly different meaning.

The primary aim of **quality assurance** is to demonstrate that a service or product *fulfills or meets a set of requirements or criteria*. Actual processes and/or outcomes are compared to pre-defined criteria or pre-selected requirements. **Quality control** refers to the systematic use of methods to ensure that a service or product conforms to a desired standard. Primary emphasis is placed on *monitoring* processes and/or outcomes. **Quality improvement** refers to *the betterment or enhancement* of a product or service. When enhancements are ongoing or occur repeatedly over time, the process is known as **continuous quality improvement**.

What tools or approaches are used to improve quality within an agency or organization?

The American Society for Quality identifies seven **basic tools of quality** that can help agencies and organizations understand processes so that improvements can be made. These tools include the following: cause-and-effect diagram (also known as a fishbone diagram), check sheet, control chart, histogram, Pareto chart, and scatter diagram. It is important to point out that other tools exist and are used, such as flowcharts, rating forms, box plots, and root cause analysis. Definitions and examples of these tools and approaches are available in the data display and quality improvement glossaries at this web site. Additional information about the seven basic tools of quality is available at the American Society for Quality web site (<http://www.asq.org>) as well as other sites.

Many agencies and organizations also use an approach known as **benchmarking** to make improvements in their products and services. Benchmarking is a process in which an agency's performance is compared to external standards that have been established as high levels of performance. These external standards are sometimes referred to as "gold standards," and are

derived from continuous quality improvement efforts of agencies that have demonstrated and sustained outstanding levels of performance.