

Getting Clinical Audit Right to Benefit Patients

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1

The clinical audit process

Why do clinical audit — *To improve and account for quality*

If you provide or manage a healthcare service, you have to know about the quality of health care being delivered. Clinical audit is a process for finding out how well care is being provided and learning if care and outcomes can be improved.

Clinical audit is a systematic activity that applies knowledge about good clinical practice to day-to-day delivery of patient care. So it is a professionally acceptable way to participate in performance evaluation and a way to show accountability for quality of care. Benefits of carrying out the clinical audit process are in the box.

Benefits of the clinical audit process

Guide

The clinical audit process:

- shows that the **care you provide is** routinely **consistent with** evidence of **good practice**
- when there is no valid evidence available that defines good practice for an aspect of care, shows that your practice is consistent with good practice as agreed by consensus among your colleagues
- helps you **find** exactly **where improvements** in practice **are needed and** helps you **make** these **improvements**
- **raises** your **awareness** of the **information** that has to be documented in a patient's record in order to assess the quality of care, whether the record is electronic or paper
- **facilitates learning** about current practice among members of a clinical team and **working together** to make improvements.

Clinical audit defined — *To improve care*

The meaning of clinical audit, as described in this book, is explained in the box on the next page.¹ A definition of quality improvement is also provided.²⁻³

Term	Meaning	Definitions
Clinical audit	A quality improvement process that seeks to improve patient care and outcomes through systematic review of care against explicit measures and the implementation of changes in practice if needed Aspects of the structure, processes and outcomes of care are selected and systematically compared with explicit measures of good practice. Where indicated, changes are implemented at an individual, team or service level and further measurement is carried out to confirm improvement in healthcare delivery.	
Quality improvement	Systematic, data-guided activities designed to bring about immediate, positive changes in the delivery of health care in particular settings	

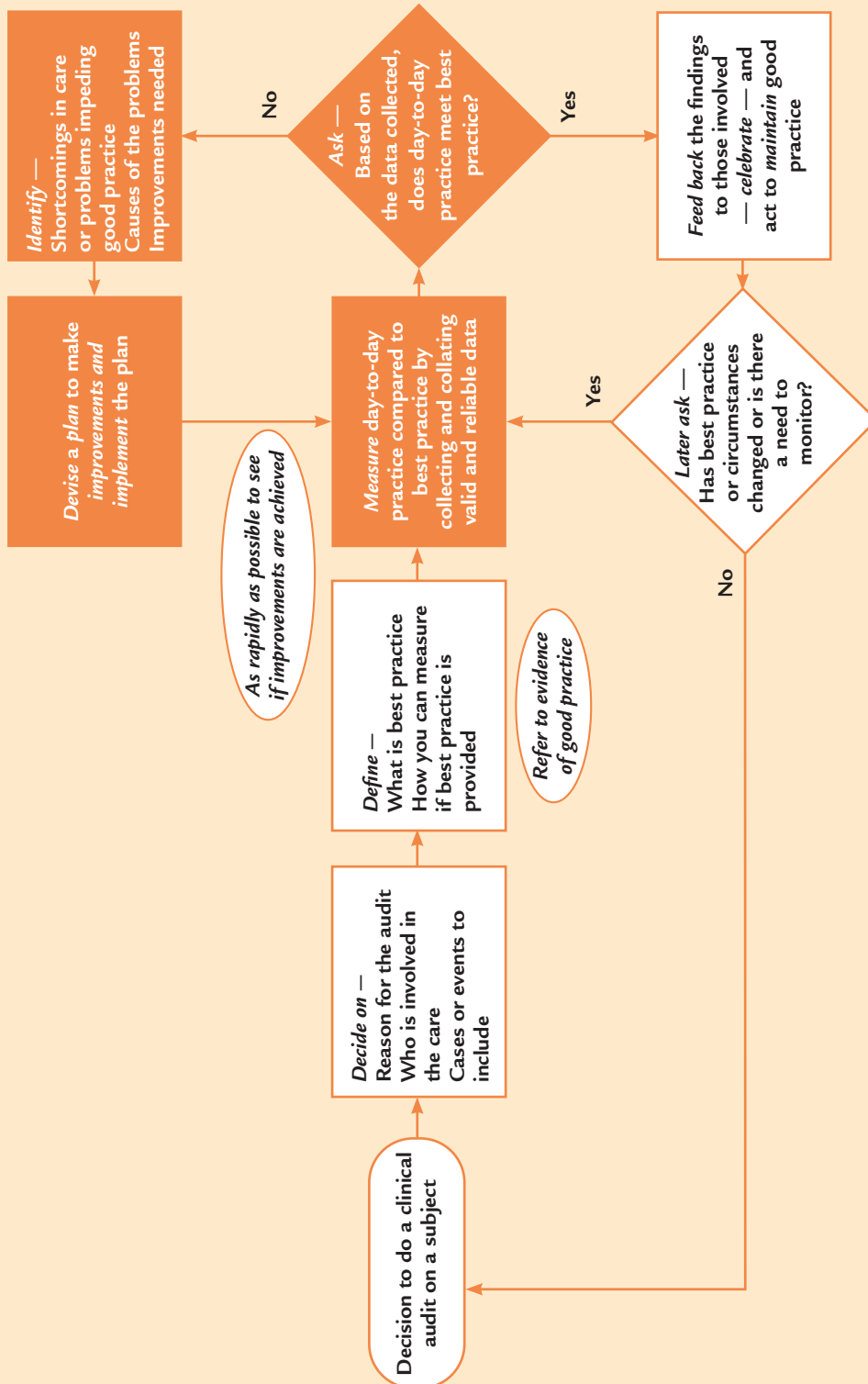
The clinical audit process — *Measuring quality and acting on the findings*

The steps in the clinical audit process are in the box. The process involves:

- **defining best practice** for patients with a condition or experiencing an aspect of care or service
- **checking if patients** actually **receive** care that is **best practice**
- **changing** the way care is delivered **to make improvements**, if needed.

The clinical audit process	Guide
<p>In the clinical audit process, a clinical team works through these steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • agrees on an important subject for clinical audit and the objective/s of the audit • designs carefully how the audit will be carried out • formulates precise measures of the quality of care or service, which may incorporate standards or evidence of good clinical practice • uses the clinical audit measures as the basis for collecting data on day-to-day practice • evaluates the findings and any cases or events that did not meet quality expectations • <i>if the findings show that the clinical audit measures are being met, gives feedback</i> on good practice to those involved and acts to maintain good practice • <i>if the findings show that the clinical audit measures are not being met:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – analyses the shortcomings in care or the problems revealed and finds their root causes – takes action to eliminate or minimize the causes of the problems and achieve the intended improvement – measures again when action is taken to see if patient care is improved. 	

The clinical audit process is shown in the diagram on the next page. The darker shapes show the quality improvement part of the process.



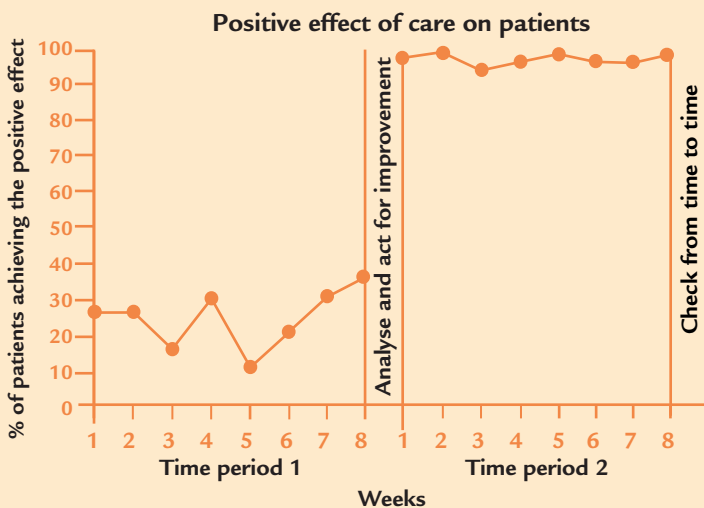
Rapid-cycle approach to clinical audit — A classic before-after design

The graphs below show how clinical audit works as a quality improvement process. An audit is a study that can measure what happens before and after making a change in practice. The first measurement of actual practice establishes a baseline of current practice in comparison to best practice. If best practice is not being provided currently, the team carrying out the clinical audit plans and implements changes in the way care is being provided in order to improve practice — as rapidly as possible.

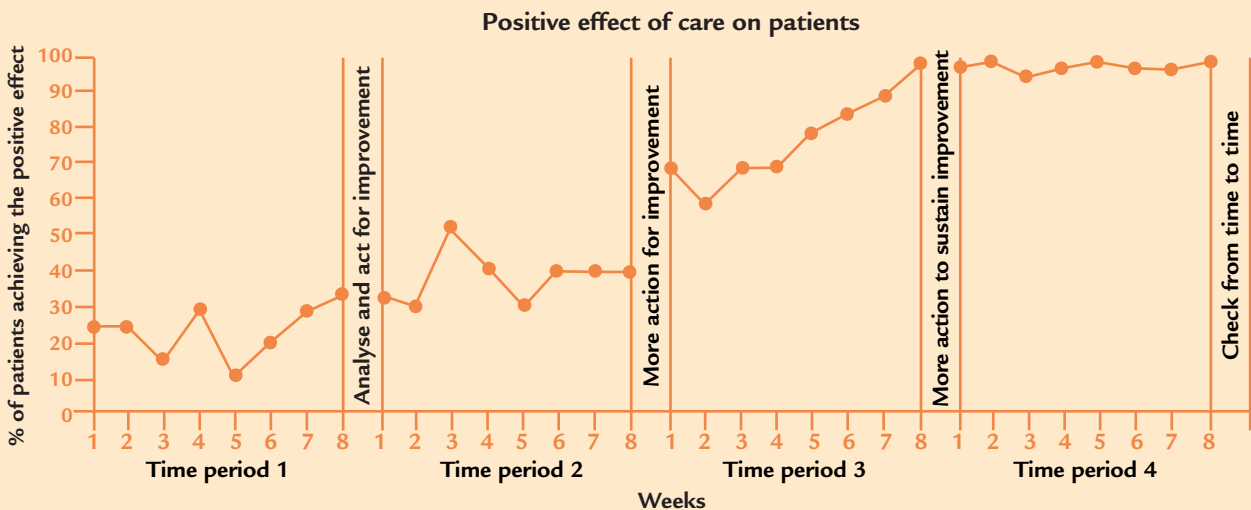
Then, the team has to repeat the measurement to find out if the change worked. The measure — act — measure cycle may need to be repeated several times to show that changes being made really are improving care.

One audit cycle

Illustration



Ongoing audit cycles



Clinical survey versus clinical audit — *Measuring what is or what should be*

People have used the term clinical audit to describe two different activities:

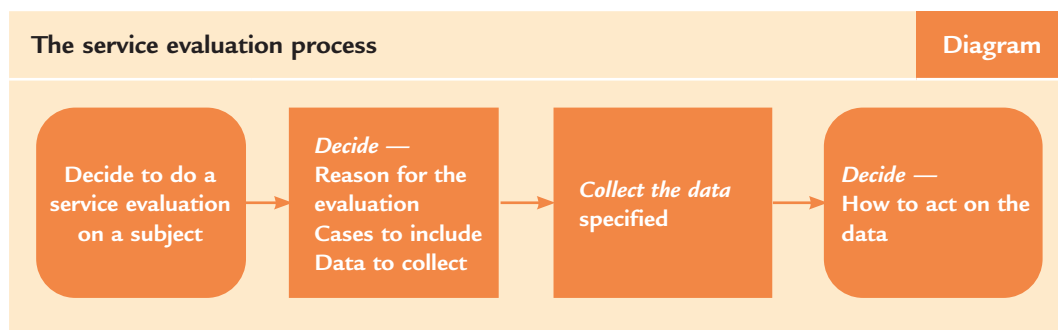
- **description** or **observation** of current practice. This type of activity is better referred to as a **service evaluation** as defined in the box.⁴
- **measurement** of current practice in comparison with specific quality-of-care **measures** or ‘criteria’.

Term	Meaning	Definition
Service evaluation	Collects and interprets data about a service without reference to a standard that defines good practice or service	

The characteristics of each type of activity are in the box.

Characteristic	Service evaluation or descriptive study	Clinical audit	Guide
What’s involved	Collect data to find out how many times something happens to patients — counting the incidence of certain events	Collect data to find out how many patients were treated consistent with a criterion — measuring compliance with a stated expectation of quality	
Reason for doing	Find out what current practice is Establish a baseline of current practice Contribute to standards of good practice Identify specific aspects of care for a clinical audit	Find out if current practice is consistent with best practice Solve problems that impede providing quality care Improve current practice if needed	
How quality is measured	Inferred from data collected No stated standard of care Expect variation in practice	Explicitly defined in measures Stated standard of care Examine variation from measures	
Outcomes of the activity	Data on current practice — may stimulate changes in practice	Confirmation of good practice or improvement in practice	

The diagram of the service evaluation process on the next page shows that improvement could happen from a service evaluation, but it is not an explicit part of the formal process.



This book is about the criterion-based model of clinical audit because it is the clinical audit model more closely associated with achieving improvements in quality of care.

Clinical audit and research — *Differences in purposes*

It is useful to understand the differences in purposes between clinical audit and research. The term research is defined in the box.⁵

Term	Meaning	Definition
Research	The attempt to derive generalizable or transferable new knowledge to answer or refine questions with scientifically sound methods	

Research is about generating hypotheses and verifying scientifically a predicted but not necessarily proven relationship between or among variables such as clinical processes and outcomes. Research studies in health care also observe the outcomes and costs of healthcare interventions.⁶ The way research works is shown in the diagram on the next page.

Clinical audit and research are both scientifically sound methods of investigation. Clinical audit is about measuring current clinical practice compared with established good practice. Clinical audit is not about finding out which treatments or other interventions work best. The major differences between the activities are in the box on page 9.