



Benchmarking the Emergency Department

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Benchmarking is a powerful tool to improve emergency department (ED) operations. Benchmarking is a proactive process of measuring and comparing performance. Internal benchmarking compares your current performance to your own past performance. External benchmarking compares your performance to other EDs and to established best practices.

Without benchmarking, your estimates of your ED's comparative strengths and weaknesses are based on speculation rather than data, and major opportunities for improvement are easily missed. Furthermore, without benchmarking your performance over time, you cannot effectively evaluate the success of any process improvement initiative.

Goals should be periodically set and progress towards meeting goals should be transparent. Success should be recognized and rewarded. Lack of progress towards goals should be investigated and new strategies introduced when appropriate.

Successful benchmarking leads to the recognition of best practices and incorporation of those practices into ED operations, which results in measurable gains in quality, efficiency, and satisfaction, and helps to improve your financial bottom line. Sometimes best practices from other non-ED hospital departments (i.e. operating room checklists) or even other industries can be adopted (i.e. registration kiosks in airports).

Careful attention must be given to appropriate data collection. Standardized definitions should be used for time intervals, so that you are comparing "apples to apples"¹. The data should be carefully reviewed and erroneous data should be removed. Whenever possible, comparisons should be made to similar EDs, so the most meaningful comparisons can be made.

Ideal emergency department key performance indicators (KPIs) should be relevant, measurable, meaningful, evidence-based, and lead to performance improvement opportunities. A wide variety of KPIs should be evaluated to accurately assess the broad spectrum of emergency department care. Key considerations include KPIs related to ED throughput, staffing, crowding, patient satisfaction, staff satisfaction, finances, outcome measures, clinical best practices, and ED operational best practices.

Many of the KPIs that significantly affect ED performance are under the control of other hospital departments (i.e. radiology, laboratory) and are not directly managed by the ED leadership. It is still important to track the performance of these ancillary services in how they related to the ED, in order to effectively advocate for performance improvement. For example, external benchmarking results showing that your hospital's ED CT scan interpretation time is significantly longer than similar hospitals offers useful information for discussions with the radiology leadership.

The KPIs evaluated should reflect the priorities of all major ED stakeholders. Often, only the KPIs of most interest to hospital leadership are reflected. It is important to also consider the perspectives of important stakeholder groups such as the physicians, nurses, and ancillary staff working in the ED, the medical staff, the patients, and other groups that interact with the ED (i.e. EMS). These stakeholders can have an enormous impact on ED performance. Engaging stakeholders via anonymous surveys of key stakeholder groups' impressions of the ED can offer valuable information and help recognize unaddressed concerns. Performance improvement initiatives proactively guided by stakeholder needs and expectations will have a much greater impact than simply reacting to adverse events and complaints.

A comprehensive ED benchmarking initiative can be the cornerstone of your ED's ongoing performance improvement efforts. Particular attention to what you are benchmarking, the process by which you are doing it, and how the information is used, is important to making your efforts as effective as possible.

¹ Welch S, Augustine J, Camargo CA Jr, Reese C. Emergency department performance measures and benchmarking summit. *Academic Emergency Medicine*. 2006 Oct;13(10):1074-1080. Epub 2006 Aug 31