

ACCREDITATION: A NEW BEGINNING

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The sine qua non in the health sector today is “Quality”. In our country, too, there seems to be a growing urgency amongst health care providers for effective and efficient health care. This process I accentuated due to the increasing demands placed on the providers for quality medical care by people, especially the middle class. As a result, new and different ways of understanding quality, new approaches to its measurement and implementation are continuously emerging within the health care delivery system. One approach, which is gaining momentum, is the process of accreditation.

WHAT IS ACCREDITATION?

Accreditation is a process wherein standards are set and compliance with them is measured. According to C E Lewis, accreditation is “professional and national recognition reserved for facilities that provide high quality health care”. This means that the particular health care facility has voluntarily sought to be measured against high professional standards and is in substantial compliance with them (Lewis C.E. in Scrivens Ellie, “Accreditation: Protecting the professional or the consumer? 1955).

In simple terms, we can say that accreditation refers to a voluntary process wherein the functioning of a participating hospital / nursing home is assessed against set standards.

Efforts are being made around the globe to develop accreditation as one of the alternatives to improve the quality of care. Since its origin in 1917 in the United States of America, where it has presently developed in to the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care organisations (JCAHO) accreditation has also spread to countries like Canada and Australia, Countries such as the United Kingdom, South Africa, New Zealand, Spain, Israel, Taiwan, among many others, are also engaged in the process of developing their own accreditation system.

ACCREDITATION IN INDIA

While understanding this concept in the Indian context, we must bear in mind that private hospitals and nursing homes are an important link in the health care delivery system, and also consider the pivotal role played by them in the provision of health care services. The present paper mainly aims at raising issue which could come up, while exploring the possibility of establishing an accreditation system in our country, especially in the city of Mumbai. The initiation of such a system requires us to gain a deeper insight into the various areas relating to the role, structure and functioning of the system, as well as implications of the system for the various constituents. Apart from the role the system plays the manner in which it operates works on the basic tenet that the system, which is formed, should be acceptable to the various constituents in the health care sector. This would be reflected in the way it is structured. Keeping this mind, an important aspect is how should representatives from various constituents be included not only to form the constitution of the system but also to control its activities which would cover the internal policies and procedures as to how the system would function.

MONITORING SYSTEM

In terms of the functioning of the system, we need to look at the procedures followed to measure compliance against set standards and the follow-up mechanisms after the assessment

among any other role envisaged. The main question which arises is who would assume responsibility for ensuring that the stipulated procedures are duly followed? Keeping in focus the cruciality of these procedures, the selection and training of these individuals is an important area. One needs to develop a set of criteria for employing them as well as to ensure that they are trained for the various tasks down.

The costs that would incur in the running of any system have always been a very critical area. This also holds true in the case of the possibility of establishing an accreditation system. The issue of prime importance is how will the system finance itself? How will the initial cost of establishing and running the system be met? Among others, one also needs to consider whether membership fees should be levied on participating hospitals to cover the various costs incurred or will the government be able to provide grants or any schemes of financial assistance?

PROTECTING PROFESSIONALS OR CONSUMERS?

Gradually, as the system evolves, another issue, which needs to be addressed, is that of publicness of information. The means deciding to whom should the assessment findings be disclosed. The answer to this unveils the dilemma faced whether the system aims at protecting the professional or the consumer?

As this system cannot exist in a vacuum, whatever form it takes, it will definitely have a certain impact not only on the participating hospital but also on the various other constituents involved in the health care system. These would encompass the providers, the consumers, and the policy-makers, insurance companies and financial institutions among others. The providers would be able to reassure themselves as well as the public that the infrastructure of that particular health care organisation is at a level to promote the best possible care within the existing restraints.

It would also provide them with appropriate working environments for practice. Consumers are taught to believe 'you get what you pay for'. When confronted with a choice about selection of a health care provider, they have little information and tend to associate high quality with high price. They may utilize the accreditation system to make informed choices thereby reducing the burden to develop their own criteria for their choice of the health care provider.

The policy-makers are always under constant pressure to formulate mechanisms to monitor the functioning of the health care delivery system. They may use the accreditation system to enhance the development of the health care services as well as to move towards improving the existing health care systems. Insurance companies as well as financial institutions could use the process of accreditation to identify well run hospitals and can limit their schemes to these hospitals and nursing homes which deliver quality medical care.

Finally, what seems to emerge is that it is pertinent for the concept of accreditation to evolve in a democratic manner while reflecting the existing social, political and economic realities. In this paper, we have just attempted to highlight certain key issues, which need to be dealt with and are essential in this first step towards a new beginning in the quality movement in health care delivery.

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