

St. Mikes CEO describes quality journey

The President and CEO of St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto delivered a "tour de force" presentation on his hospital's journey to implement a quality agenda – a journey which he said could take 15 years and is only at the midway point.

The praise for Dr. Robert Howard's presentation came from Dr. Joshua Tepper, president and CEO of Health Quality Ontario who introduced the Health Quality Ontario Quality Rounds talk which was also broadcast on the Ontario Telemedicine Network.

Howard began by noting that while in the past his comments have focused more on the "why" of implementing quality initiatives, this is no longer in question as the current culture is fully accepting of the need for such initiatives.

Quality improvement "is also not a sprint," he said and to be successful, needs to be integrated as an "explicit part" of the strategic plan for a hospital and become part of institutional culture.

"You can't improve if you don't change," he said.

Howard also discussed a range of activities that could constitute a quality agenda ranging from quality improvement, through seeking out and imitating best practices, to innovation and creation of new models and ideas.

"There is almost no risk to doing quality initiatives," he said, but added being innovative can be much more challenging because "hospitals don't like failure ... for good reason."

Howard also discussed various levels of quality improvement from large "meso" projects requiring significant resources and infrastructure, to "micro" level projects which can be implemented reasonably quickly and easily.

"You have to spend money to do quality improvement properly in a hospital," he said. He also noted the importance of supporting front line by providing the necessary infrastructure and access to expertise in analytics, and developing skills in improvement methodologies.

The importance of properly measuring and communicating changes instituted as part of a quality agenda were also stressed by Howard who noted many improvements may be "invisible" at the individual practitioner level unless they are supplied with data documenting the changes.

For St. Michael's part, Howard identified a few key areas where there is a quality focus; preventing falls, hand cleaning, electronic medication record and reducing ED waits.

He also talked of the importance of truly engaging patients, noting this would be different for every hospital. Just appointing a patient to every hospital committee, he described as "patronizing" and not particularly effective. "You need to target initiatives to the groups you are interested in and make it real for them."

Having been CEO at St. Michael's since 2009, Howard said even though the hospital has a "tremendous" culture and "takes the journey of quality extremely seriously," those who he has consulted in private industry suggest it takes 15 years to fully implement a quality agenda.

As such, his work to implement such an agenda at St. Michael's is only half-way done.

