Navigating Toward a Quality Career

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In the decade since the publication of To *Err is Human*[1], many organizations and educational programs have been established in an effort to develop health care leaders ready to confront the enormous task of building a better health care system. We all know that our health care system is in crisis, but where can we find professionals that are qualified to meet the challenge? How do we plan for the future and create the skilled workforce that is so desperately needed?

In response to this national focus on quality and safety, we find that students in programs of health administration, medicine, and allied health professions are being introduced to these topics in their undergraduate training. Though this is a significant step, students at this juncture in their preparation will likely be exposed to basic information and lack real-world experience within a health care system. Students with an interest in ensuring the health of populations would be likely candidates to pursue advanced educational opportunities in quality and safety. Graduate studies provide advanced curricula, and develop competency and credentials in a specific area and arm a professional with proof of education.

Having quality at the forefront of the national agenda will inevitably create opportunities for employment. However, since there are as yet no standard qualifications and credentials, young professionals can face significant roadblocks on the path to a career in quality. Because this is not yet a well known or common career path, popular employment search engines (eg, Monster.com) do not provide adequate features and the criteria needed to identify positions in the field. Many professionals pursuing this line of work have been clinicians who have chosen to switch from or supplement their clinical work, thus limiting educational resources for non-clinical professionals. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, work experience is key to understanding and implementing the systems changes inherent in pursuing a career in quality. A degree in health administration is not sufficient to meet the job requirements of many positions, and it is not clear how candidates can gain the experience needed to establish an appropriate career trajectory.

How — and where — can someone interested in health care quality and patient safety get the required education and experience? Although opportunities for professional development are expanding, the majority are targeted at mid-career professionals. The Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) will launch a program called IHI Open School for Health Professions in September 2008, creating an interdisciplinary educational community of health professionals interested in quality and safety.[2] Certifications provide additional credentials which demonstrate competency, and fellowships are an educational opportunity to expand knowledge on a specific topic. The only current master's program in Quality and Safety (at Northwestern University)[3] has a minimum requirement of five years of related work experience.

Alternatively, a master's program designed to admit students with a bachelor's degree as the minimum requirement would provide a foundation for those interested in this area. A clerkship, practicum, or some equivalent integrated into the curriculum may provide the experience that most of the positions require. Eliminating the minimum experience requirement would encourage early-careerists to pursue an advanced degree in health care quality and patient safety and may entice others who had not previously considered this field. Ultimately, this will help to open the doors, influence the workforce, and anchor future professionals in the field of quality and safety.

Quality and patient safety is important to all health care professionals and many more educational opportunities will soon be available to professionals interested in this important topic. In the meantime, continue to educate yourself about quality and safety because "The need for leadership in healthcare has never been greater…"[4]

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