

Quality Qorner

Cairns in the Cow Pies

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I had the most delightful adventure last fall—hiking the West Highland Way in Scotland with a small group of fellow trekkers. The remnants of a hurricane had swept up our country's eastern seaboard and crossed the Atlantic Ocean to park itself firmly over Scotland for much of the adventure. Thus, our hiking was rather soggy.

I always say, however, that you make your own good time. So, properly bundled in the miracle of polypro, fleece, and Gore-Tex—and fortified with a “full Scottish breakfast”—we walked in the constant drizzle along the old military road that joins Glasgow to Fort William, easily imagining how cold, damp, and miserable the ancient soldiers must have felt in their soaked-through wet woolen garments and wet leather boots.

Once north of the beautiful Loch Lomond, the Way tracks through pasturelands and moors, complete with abundant evidence of the output of the inhabitants' ruminations. So, we often had to, literally, tiptoe through the cow pies. To make light of the grey days, the faster-paced trekkers began to leave messages for the more leisurely amblers. A cairn is a Scottish word for a conical heap of stones built as a monument or landmark, often used to mark the intended path. Our playful companions were leaving cairns for us—in the cow pies!

Do you wonder, perhaps, how I can construct a message about quality from observing rocks piled in excrement? It wasn't hard; actually, I could see the symbolism quite clearly through the dampening fog and drizzle. The laboratory community has not only left a trail of cow pies in the form of serious laboratory errors and quality-management problems that have occurred in the past few years, but we also had our faces rubbed in the aftermath as the reports made the national news.

And what about the cairns? Well, I consider the cairns as the markers that show us the path—the lessons learned from our flops. We should pay attention to those messages—lest we step in it again.

Message #1: Fertile ground for improvement. Our laboratory accreditation programs are stronger now since being considerably revamped a few years ago. Yes, now your laboratory has to be ready for unannounced external assessments. However, it is much better for the patients that the laboratory is constantly ready—rather than cleaning up just in time to present only an appearance of readiness for the sake of prescheduled inspectors! Constant readiness is a seed-bed for constant improvement.

Message #2: The Way itself. Walking along a quality path allows the laboratory to see ahead to the next cairn. Information derived from quality indicators, complaint files, proficiency testing performance, internal audits, and other assessment measures allows the laboratory to see its Way and realign its adherence to the quality trail where necessary.

Message #3: There will always be cow pies. Human error is widely acknowledged as a major cause of quality and safety risks

in health care. Concordantly, there is no way to completely eliminate human error in the health care laboratory. Therefore, we must consider laboratory “cow pies” (ie, errors), as fuel to design better laboratory processes that achieve the desired end results.

So, what messages can you derive from your laboratory's cow pies? Fortunately, the CLSI has recently published a means for your laboratory to answer that question. New CLSI guideline HS12-P, Management of Nonconforming Laboratory Events, provides an outline and the content for developing a program to manage “cow pies”—that is, a program to manage your laboratory's nonconforming events—also known as occurrences, errors, incidents, accidents, deviations, and nonconformities.

As the words themselves suggest, “nonconforming events” are those happenings that do not conform with your laboratory's established policies, processes, or procedures, or with applicable regulatory or accreditation requirements. They have the potential to affect (or have affected) patient safety, or have the potential to affect (or have affected) the efficiency and effectiveness of laboratory work operations.

A nonconforming event management program identifies systemic problems and spurs laboratory management's commitment to removing the causes. Nonconforming event management is also linked to quality management. Removing the root causes of nonconforming events leads to improved quality, which leads to improved patient safety.

If it hasn't already, your laboratory should implement a nonconforming event management program. All staff would, then, be involved in identifying laboratory cow pies and also be engaged to help remove them from the health care trail. Thus, your quality path will be clean of embarrassing obstacles and patients will derive great benefit.

My favorite “cairn in the cow pie” during our group's walk along the Way was not made by humans. On the last day, at the side of the trail was a particularly decrepit old cow pie. Springing up from the decay were the most perfect, beautiful, little brown mushrooms! Our lead companions saw it first and marked the trail with a big stone arrow so we would not miss its message: “Triumph from adversity.”

This Month's Quality Quote:

“Quality . . . is like buying oats. If you want nice, clean fresh oats, you have to pay a fair price for them. Oats that have already been through the horse are a bit cheaper.”

—Anonymous

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