

Watch Your Quality Garden Grow

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This is the month of the vernal equinox, the official arrival of spring. All you serious gardeners out there will pore over plant catalogs, visit the reopened-after-winter gardening shops, and eagerly await the opportunity to get outside and get your hands into the fertile soil again. New life! New color! New beauty! New hope for the prize-winning dahlia at the garden show!

In the yard of my Illinois home, I built and planted a raised perennial garden. It looked so easy in the catalog—just buy the little plants, embed them in the pattern shown on the kit, water and weed them, and watch them grow. Instant beauty outside my front window! Then I started traveling for work more frequently and my lovely little garden became chaos. Entropy prevailed and the plants lost their organization and energy over time. And I lost my passion to care for them; I was barely managing the busyness of my business and personal lives.

Much like a garden, your laboratory's service to patients and other customers is a living entity that needs maintenance and cultivation. Consider yourself an "organizational gardener" of your laboratory's living quality management system that must be sustained to provide beauty in our professional contribution to patient care.

Any laboratory can produce a ring binder with 12 tabs that contain documents for the quality system essentials (QSEs) and call it a quality management system. It's analogous to my purchasing a set of plants, embedding them according to the map provided, calling it a perennial garden, and leaving for two weeks. Similarly, the laboratory trots out this quality book only when expecting the imminent arrival of accreditation inspectors. In the interim, it's business as usual—for me, working away from home and paying bills when I am home; for the laboratory, it's lost samples, complaints, nonconformances, inefficiencies, and all the other "weeds" that stress and strain our days.

Your laboratory's quality management system needs organizational gardening. Your management team should identify, nurture, and tend to the quality management processes; that is, the QSEs that ensure healthy growth and sustainability. Here's an application of basic gardening principles to tending your laboratory's quality management system.¹

1. Expect the seasons.

Systematically look at your laboratory's administrative manual and technical procedures manuals and perform the necessary pruning, spraying, and transplanting to clearly identify the processes and procedures for making the QSEs run smoothly. Regulatory and accreditation requirements change periodically. Have you rebuilt work processes to accommodate new requirements or have you merely buried them in work-arounds? Plan-Do-Check-Act is a never-ending cycle. Whatever is in place in your laboratory can be improved.

2. It is all an interconnected ecosystem.

Your laboratory's preanalytic processes are heavily dependent on the success of departments and personnel

outside laboratory walls. Be sure to invite those involved into discussions about how to best design these processes for the benefit of patients, the laboratory, nurses, physicians, and other laboratory customers. It's the best way to prevent unintended consequences from unilateral laboratory decisions. It also helps ensure that everyone has the same understanding of "who does what and when."

3. Don't spray everything.

As a medical laboratory quality professional, I've seen many quality "flavors of the month" over the years, such as TQM, CQI, reengineering, Six Sigma, and Lean. Although each in itself is a good quality tool, remember principle #2 above—and remember also that one tool does not fit all problems. Just because your laboratory uses a quality tool or two does not constitute organizational gardening. Have a variety of tools; know when to use them and when not to use them.²

4. Get dirty.

Dig in; pull weeds. Although organizational gardening is hard work, both your laboratory and its customers will benefit. Get out there and work with the emergency department to reduce turnaround time for critical tests. Streamline waiting time for outpatient blood collection. Strive to reduce unacceptable samples. Study laboratory nonconformances to identify and remove root causes. Your garden is calling. Weeds are costing you precious resources and may be compromising patient safety.

Sadly, my present house has no yard for a garden, nor any houseplants; that is, until I picked up a forlorn piece of broken cactus just short of being stomped on by winter boots in my local post office. My gardening genes took over, making me bring it home and root and plant it. I look at it every day to remind me of the importance of helping laboratories cultivate beautiful quality gardens—now, and into the future.

1. Adapted from: Dew J. Dig it. *Quality Progress*. 2008;41:28–33.

2. Brassard M, Cardelino C, Harkins M, et al. *The Memory Jogger II for Laboratory Operations*. Salem, NH: GOAL/QPC; 2007.

This Month's Quality Quote:

"The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order."

—Alfred North Whitehead

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