



EMHS Research Hub

QUALITY ASSURANCE PROJECTS

What is Quality Assurance (QA)?

An activity where the primary purpose is to monitor or improve the quality of care delivered by a health service is a Quality Assurance (QA) project. QA projects are often called 'quality improvement' or 'clinical audit'.

QA projects involve the systematic evaluation of health care practices, often against established standards or guidelines, in order to monitor practices and improve patient care.

QA activities ask whether we are doing the things we have agreed we should be doing or achieving the outcomes we have agreed we should be achieving.

This is usually achieved by analysing routinely obtained data to capture current practice and comparing this to existing best practice standards.

Types of QA activities include:

- Clinical Audit:** A quality improvement process seeking to improve patient care and outcomes through systematic review of care against explicit standards and the implementation of changes in practice if needed.
- Practice Review:** The systematic assessment of current practice, without comparison against set criteria or of one therapy against another and may also be known as a baseline assessment.
- Satisfaction/Knowledge Survey:** The systematic collection of data from a sample of patients or staff to determine levels of satisfaction or knowledge about a service.
- Service Improvement:** Implementing an initiative to promote change or maintain good practice/enhance care.
- Program Evaluation:** The systematic collection and analysis of information about a specific program or intervention to appraise its effectiveness.

Accredited health services are required to constantly monitor the quality of their services and QA projects are, therefore, necessary routine functions of a competent health service.

QA activities generally do not involve extra interventions or novel clinical assessments, test hypotheses, or generate new knowledge to add to the scientific or medical literature. This is research. If your project sounds more like this, see '[QA versus Research](#)' below.

EMHS Research Hub

Email: EMHS.REG@health.wa.gov.au

Web: www.emhs.health.wa.gov.au/research



Obtaining approval to conduct a QA project

All QA projects must be approved by the hospital or health service via a submission in the web-based [GEKO](#) (Governance Evaluation Knowledge Outcomes) system. GEKO allows the relevant hospital or health service committee to review the QA project and ensure the project is registered and governed appropriately.

For further information about conducting QA activities within EMHS, including how to seek approval via GEKO, please contact your institutional safety and quality office:

Armadale Kalamunda Group [Safety Quality Education and Innovation](#)

(08) 9391 2526

Royal Perth Bentley Group [Safety & Quality Division](#)

(08) 9224 2238

QA projects do not require research ethics and site governance review. Only *research* projects require these approvals.

Publishing QA findings

QA projects are generally in-house activities that aim to determine if a current practice is meeting expected outcomes. As such, the findings are typically specific to that institution, and the results are disseminated internally to support any necessary actions arising (e.g., changes to local guidelines/procedures or staff training).

If the findings are thought to have broader implications or potential benefits beyond the institution, they may be presented to a wider audience or published.

The presentation or publication of QA findings can rely upon the institutional approval obtained via the GEKO submission. *It is not necessary to obtain research ethics (or governance) approval for a QA activity simply because the findings may be published.*

QA versus Research

The above advice assumes that a project has been correctly classified as QA and is not, in fact, research. It is important to correctly classify projects as QA or research as this will determine the review pathway and type of approval required.

Research is a systematic investigation which aims to generate *new knowledge* about what works and what doesn't. In medicine, research provides the foundations for agreement about the kind of clinical treatment and care we should be providing, *ultimately defining or re-defining best practice*.

Research is about discovering the right thing to do

Quality Assurance is about ensuring it is done right

Confusion can arise because QA projects often use the same *methods* as research projects such as rigorous design, data collection and analysis, as well as the measurement of health outcomes.

A research project might compare the outcomes of two types of surgical intervention to determine which is best for certain patients or conditions. A QA project in the same area might review very similar data but with the aim of determining if the implementation of one or both of those surgical methods is producing the expected outcomes based on previously published research data.

If a project is research, it must:

1. Be approved by a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), or alternative low-risk ethical review process, and:
2. Receive site authorisation following review by the health services research governance office.

If a project is QA it is reviewed via the GEKO system (as above).

If there is any doubt as to whether your project is QA or research, please contact the EMHS Research Hub on 9224 2260 or at EMHS.REG@health.wa.gov.au

Ethical conduct in carrying out a QA project

While most QA project typically involve minimal risk, they must still be conducted in a way that is ethical. Health staff are very familiar with meeting rigorous ethical standards in everyday clinical practice and when conducting research projects. The same standards should be applied to QA projects

Staff conducting QA projects should consider whether the people involved (patients or staff) will be exposed to any potential harm or discomfort, how consent will be obtained (if applicable) and privacy protected. Staff should explicitly identify ethical issues arising and include a plan to manage them in the QA protocol. For example, like researcher, QA projects involve collating health data into aggregate form for analysis. This must be done in a way that protects patient privacy.