

What is clinical audit?



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- Clinical audit is a quality improvement process that aims to improve patient care and outcomes by carrying out a systematic review and implementing change. Aspects of patient care – including structure, processes and outcomes – are selected and evaluated against explicit criteria and, where necessary, changes are implemented at an individual, team or service level. Further monitoring can then be used to confirm the improvements in healthcare delivery. This definition is endorsed by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE).
- Clinical audit provides the framework to improve the quality of patient care in a collaborative and systematic way, as outlined in current NHS policy statements.
- The report of the public inquiry into children's heart surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary 1984–1995 (2001) highlights the importance of clinical audit.
- Clinical governance presents a new challenge – to take audit 'at its best' and incorporate it within organisation-wide approaches to quality (see *What is clinical governance?*).
- Topics for audit projects should reflect national and/or local targets; for example, in cancer services, coronary care or mental health. Projects may also need to focus on the implementation of National Service Frameworks (NSFs), Health Improvement and Modernisation Plans (HIMPs) or NICE guidelines and appraisals.
- Clinical audit has a mixed history in the NHS. For it to become an important component in the management of health services, a change needs to take place in the standing of audit programmes. Audit can no longer be seen as a fringe activity for enthusiasts within clinical governance. Instead, the NHS needs to make a commitment to support audit as a mainstream activity.
- Clinical audit, when it is conducted well, provides a way in which the quality of care can be reviewed objectively, within an approach which is supportive and developmental.

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