The Strategic Quality Manager
A Handbook for Navigating Quality Management Roles in Health and Aged Care

How to create a ‘great’ healthcare consumer experience
This very comprehensive and informative book tells its readers all about how to ‘be’ a quality manager. The subtitle, ‘A handbook for navigating quality management roles in health and aged care’, reveals the breadth of the content. At the outset, Dr Cathy Balding explains that her book is targeted at current and aspiring quality managers, and their managers and mentors. It is, she says, ‘... really a conversation about being a quality manager; theory and practice, lessons learned, top tips and – possibly – more questions! Depending on where you are in your professional life cycle, it may help you take stock and design – or redesign – your role for greater organisational impact and job satisfaction. If you’re thinking about taking on a quality position or questioning your current quality role, the material in this book may assist you to decide if this is the job for you.’ (Balding 2011: 3). Balding ‘talks to’ quality managers and ultimately encapsulates their work in an exhaustive ‘Quality Manager Skills and Knowledge Framework’ (Appendix 1: 164-176).

Balding’s extensive policy and practice knowledge and experience in healthcare quality management authoritatively underpin this thoroughly researched guide to the role of the healthcare quality manager. She has also accrued, throughout her health professional career (including, by the way, as a Health Information Manager), a deep knowledge of the workings and delivery of healthcare services. Dr Balding is arguably one of the handful of leading experts in quality management in Australasia.1

The enduring and over-arching theme of the book is the creation of a ‘great’ consumer experience. Balding systematically goes about demonstrating how quality managers and their organisations can achieve this. The reader is first introduced to the challenges and expectations of the quality manager role. This is followed by chapters that focus on the performance of that role within the context of the health service environment: firstly, on understanding complex healthcare systems, then on effecting change and, later, on creating safety and quality. There is a in-depth discussion of quality leadership and the importance of influence. Then follow a chapter on strategic quality planning, and the quality professionals’ ‘essentials kit’.

1 Readers are referred also to Dr Balding’s webpage: http://cathybalding.com/about-dr-cathy-balding/publications/
The book’s accessible language and friendly tone make it a pleasure to read. In many places it is conversational; for example, Balding talks about ‘planet healthcare’ and ‘the rules of the game’ (Balding 2011: 27; 41).

Balding identifies and subsequently re-visits critical sub-themes throughout the book. These include: the core requirements of the quality manager role; healthcare organisational complexity; the importance of a systems (as opposed to mechanistic) understanding of healthcare organisations; and the key aspects of a quality system. She distils and straightforwardly explains concepts that might otherwise seem remote to the average reader, such as resilience engineering and how to create resilient organisations and teams, complex systems factors, and circles of control and influence. She describes, in no-nonsense language, how to develop and articulate goals, set objectives, develop the goal-based quality plan, develop and implement strategies, and provide leadership and governance. Balding pragmatically critiques the use of ‘workarounds’ for avoiding rules or protocols, or for just doing the job more efficiently and, also, adopts a realistic stance on the need to balance standardisation with ‘proactive, flexible, thinking solutions’ (Balding 2011: 70).

There is an underlying practicality evident throughout the book; for example, there are suggested actions for engaging doctors in change, and advice that ‘In the end, rules don’t create safety – people do’ (Balding 2011:80). It is heartening to read specific advice for quality managers in the oft-overlooked domain of aged care; for instance, Balding proposes the adoption of Maslow’s holistic Hierarchy of Needs for use in aged and community services. Readers will recall that the hierarchy begins with fulfilment of basic biological needs; once these are met, attention is focused on the next level, being the individual’s safety, followed by needs connected to belongingness and love, esteem and, finally, self-actualisation.

This is a user-friendly book. The text is supported by easy-to-follow diagrams, helpful tips in different-coloured font, dot-point chapter ‘headline’ summaries, and clear steps demonstrating the ‘how to’ (e.g. strategic, goal-based quality planning in six steps on pages 110-112). The only obvious limitation is the absence of an Index, which would assist readers wishing to re-read certain sub-topics or sections.

This book fills a gap in the contemporary resources available for healthcare quality managers and it will prove to be a wonderful guide for current and aspirant quality managers. It sits alongside, and complements, Wolff and Taylor’s (2009) book as one of the key, reliable and informed Australasian references for practitioners and students in the health professions. The potential reach of this book may extend beyond quality managers and their supervisors and mentors: its inherent practicality will potentially appeal to a wider audience of healthcare managers and professionals who are accountable for undertaking or overseeing quality-related functions, (e.g. department heads, clinicians, unit managers, and non-clinical professionals working in healthcare). Health Information Managers and other readers of this Journal will also find it to be a very valuable and affordable resource.

References

Kerin M. Robinson BHA, BAppSc(MRA), MHP, CHIM Head, Department of Health Information Management Faculty of Health Sciences, La Trobe University Bundoora VIC 3086 AUSTRALIA email: K.Robinson@latrobe.edu.au