

Evidence on hospital accreditation to leverage its prospects for improvement

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IMPACT STATEMENT

Accreditation is widely used as an external performance assessment tool to evaluate the compliance of healthcare organizations against defined standards, with the ultimate goal of improving healthcare quality. This dissertation provides a thorough view of the impact of accreditation, drivers and challenges that affect the normalization of accreditation standards in daily work, and improvements to consider in advancing the current accreditation model. A better understanding of the accreditation system would assist policymakers, accreditors, and stakeholders in identifying areas for improvement in hospital accreditation and making informed decisions about the accreditation pathway. Also, the findings would serve as a road map for introducing changes to enhance the modernization and sustainability of accreditation. This dissertation focuses on the hospital accreditation program in Saudi Arabia. However, the lessons learned and their implications are relevant to hospital accreditation in broader contexts, as well as other accreditation programs.

Contribution relevant to frontline staff and hospital managers

As evidenced in this dissertation, engaging frontline workers in accreditation improves the integration of accreditation standards, while detaching them from the process raises the likelihood of change resistance. Indeed, the technical nature and the specificity of some accreditation standards necessitate involving frontline workers who provide the service since they are in a better position to understand and implement these standards. Therefore, hospital leaders need to adopt several strategies to enhance the participation of frontline workers, such as involving frontline workers in the planning phase, incentive programs, quality-related training, and presenting standards alongside convincing evidence.

Furthermore, this dissertation underlines the detrimental influence of accreditation on the stress level of hospital frontline workers. Saudi hospital directors perceive such stress as a key challenge influencing the participation of frontline workers in the accreditation journey. This challenge may result in certain mismatches between the real practices and accreditation standards. Hence, hospital leaders and accreditors need to take action in order to reduce the associated stress. These actions may include leadership support, conducting accreditation awareness campaigns, and better design of accreditation standards. Also, the findings encourage hospitals to adopt a continuous accreditation readiness approach to gradually incorporate accreditation standards in business operations instead of gearing up a few days or

weeks prior to the survey. This strategy helps in anchoring standards into everyday activities in a constant manner and prevents the crisis and stress that the survey may cause, as indicated in this dissertation.

The effectiveness of integrating accreditation standards depends initially on making sense of accreditation and understanding the mechanisms through which the standards are routinized into business operations. This understanding contributes to reducing cultural resistance, encouraging the participation of frontline workers in accreditation, and enhancing in-hospital teamwork during standards integration. Hence, hospital leaders need to get acquainted with accreditation standards and translate this understanding into a bundle of activities to identify performance gaps, align hospital practices with the standards, and maintain positive change. In fact, leadership commitment, involving the relevant teams, and employing a teamwork approach influence the accomplishment of these actions, as evidenced in this dissertation. Following the integration of standards, conducting an objective evaluation by hospital leaders helps to learn from successes, detect residual performance gaps, and maintain performance gains.

Contribution relevant to accreditors

This dissertation evidences multiple factors that are directly linked to the accreditation design and affect the accreditation journey in Saudi hospitals, positively and negatively. On the one hand, the clarity of accreditation standards, the evidenced-based nature of standards, and the alignment of accreditation requirements with the hospital strategy are perceived as enablers that support integrating accreditation standards. On the contrary, the cost of the accreditation visit, standard irrelevancy, and lack of inter-surveyor reliability are perceived as the main challenges. Hence, accrediting bodies need to address factors affecting standards integration by strengthening enablers and weakening restrainers in order to increase the likelihood of institutionalizing accreditation standards at the hospital level.

Sustaining hospital accreditation programs requires reframing the current model while addressing the influencing challenges. This dissertation provides evidence of key improvements that are important for accrediting bodies to consider when redesigning hospital accreditation, including changes in the accreditation policy, standards development, survey evaluation, and the survey team. For instance, accrediting bodies continue to disregard the results of patient satisfaction surveys in the accreditation decision matrix. Hence, accreditors need to integrate patient perspectives in all aspects of accreditation, including decisions, as evidenced in

this dissertation. Furthermore, the findings of this dissertation cast doubt on the validity of the snapshot evaluation approach employed during accreditation surveys. Therefore, this dissertation underscores the importance of substituting this approach with a monitoring system to ensure continuous compliance with accreditation standards. Also, the dissertation emphasizes the importance of shifting the focus of accreditation standards to outcomes and improvements, instead of structure and process. Lastly, accreditors need to exhort efforts in using rigorous selection criteria for recruiting surveyors, training surveyors on accreditation standards effectively, and reducing the variations among survey teams.

Despite the fact that the dissertation focuses on the case of Saudi Arabia, the lessons learned on accreditation challenges and sustainability are relevant to hospital accreditation in broader contexts. Hence, as presented in this dissertation, accrediting bodies on a national and international scale need to establish several innovative improvements in hospital accreditation schemes to preserve the position of accreditation as a quality improvement tool while also enhancing its sustainability and future relevance.

Contribution relevant to policymakers

This dissertation shows that adhering to accreditation standards offers several advantages in terms of improving the quality of healthcare services at macro- and micro-levels. In healthcare, policymakers establish the regulations that govern the health system through various health policies to achieve specific healthcare goals and ensure that people are safe and healthy. Indeed, this role is congruent with the ultimate goal of accreditation. As evidenced in this dissertation, integrating accreditation standards offers several benefits at the hospital and societal levels. Using the case of Saudi Arabia, this dissertation provides policymakers with a better understanding of the accreditation working mechanism and the influencing factors. Accreditation is viewed as a performance improvement tool that complements other national quality improvement strategies. Therefore, the effectiveness of accreditation expands upon harmonizing the accreditation standards with other health policies, as discussed in this dissertation. Hence, policymakers need to incentivize and modernize accreditation policy to support national health strategic priorities in promoting the quality of healthcare.

As evidenced in the dissertation, a variety of policy-related driving and restraining factors influence the integration of accreditation standards. In Saudi Arabia, linking

accreditation to the reimbursement system, synchronizing accreditation standards with the requirements of authoritative entities, and the national health reform and privatization are perceived as enablers. On the other hand, the bureaucratic decision-making procedures, lack of governance expertise in quality, and limited financial support are the main perceived challenges, as shown in this dissertation. These findings assist policymakers in assessing accreditation readiness at the national level, prioritizing efforts and resources, and making informed decisions on how to strengthen policy-related drivers and weaken restrainers. Hence, policymakers need to exhort strategic efforts to strengthen the alignment of accreditation standards with the national regulations, national health strategic priorities, and the requirements of other health policies in order to increase the likelihood of institutionalizing accreditation standards. Further, policymakers need to allocate adequate and suitable resources to assist healthcare facilities in meeting accreditation standards.

Contribution to society

The societal impact of this dissertation rests on providing patients and families with a broad view and knowledge of the accreditation system. In this, patients would realize that accreditation is a comprehensive process rather than just a certificate obtained and hung on a wall. In addition, the dissertation provides patients and families with an overview of the impact of integrating accreditation standards in hospital operations and how this integration results in improved quality of care and health outcomes.

Indeed, the role of patients in hospital accreditation goes beyond simply being a recipient of care. According to this dissertation, patients are at the center of accreditation processes. For instance, staff commitment to patient-centered approach and public confidence in accreditation as a quality marker facilitate staff engagement in accreditation. Furthermore, involving patient perspectives in all accreditation aspects is perceived as one of the most important changes to be considered when enhancing the current accreditation model, as shown in this dissertation. This may increase the validity of the process, make it more customer-driven, and increase the confidence of patients in accredited hospitals.

Contribution to research

This dissertation is based on qualitative and quantitative evidence designed following a comprehensive systematic review of the impact of hospital accreditation.

The findings show a positive impact of hospital accreditation on the quality of healthcare. Yet, various factors affect the process of integrating accreditation standards in business operations. This dissertation shows that the advantages of accreditation are undeniable. However, given the complexity, time, and expenditures required to meet accreditation standards, further rigorous studies to investigate the impact of accreditation, particularly on economic outcomes will be beneficial. Also, conducting longitudinal research to detect changes and improvements over time may help in determining accreditation effects.

From another angle, the dissertation emphasizes that numerous internal and external factors influence the attitude of stakeholders toward implementing accreditation standards. In this, staff engagement in accreditation affects the integration process positively. Hence, this dissertation encourages conducting further research to evaluate the strategies that consolidate the engagement of stakeholders and explore the resource requirements to overcome possible obstacles. Furthermore, the dissertation recommends exploring the attitude of various stakeholders toward accreditation to help determine the future shape of accreditation models.