Mangin on QOF

I am no great lover of the Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF) introduced to general practice for payment from the NHS. However I believe that the thrust of Mangin and Toop’s editorial1 in the June 2007 issue is wrong. I can see how the QOF may appear to some to lead British GPs to deliver care for QOF-related conditions, but I do not believe that this is inevitable.

I dispute ‘the message that QOF priorities are the most important aspects of care.’ What happened with the introduction of QOF is that the delivery of chronic care clinics by nurses has been accelerated, probably because it is perceived as a cheaper option. Unfortunately, nurses are good at following protocols and less good at asking difficult questions of the evidence behind them. This is the trend that I believe leads to uninform ed treatment, but it is not due to QOF — it was already happening as the preferred method of delivering chronic disease management in primary care. The effect is that I am less likely to manage life-shortening chronic conditions such as atherosclerosis. Paradoxically, QOF has in some ways reduced the importance of these conditions.

Looking at my working week as a part-time GP, less than 6% of my face-to-face time is spent with the main purpose of delivering care for QOF-related conditions, mainly epilepsy and COPD.

The introduction of QOF has provided software that reminds me when the patient in front of me has important medical conditions which may benefit from QOF indicators and which conditions should be covered. Instead, Mangin and Toop advocate an alternative: a professional education system, which uses evidence and feedback, guidance, and options for GPs and patients to interpret themselves. This sounds like an appealing option yet what will their system bring? Grol provides a good overview regarding which interventions led to improved medical care.1 This research indicates that a focus on education alone is seldom effective and, as such, Mangin and Toop’s suggestion may not deliver. Combined and multifaceted interventions are recommended and a combination of QOF with an educational system would have more chance of success. For example, one could add a system like Quality Team Development which would help to grasp the intangible aspects of care.2

Abandoning QOF completely, however, and going back to just education systems does not seem the way forward.

Henricus GJ van den Heuvel
GP, Medical Centre Gütersloh, Princess Royal Barracks, BFPO 47, Gütersloh, Germany.
E-mail: rickvandenheuvel@doctors.org.uk

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Mangin and Toop4 provide an interesting overview of QOF, reflecting the many useful


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from being addressed. I can do this after
the problems my patient brings to the
consultation. We can have an informed
discussion together considering the QOF
reminders, my clinical knowledge of the
evidence, and the patient’s viewpoint.
Informed dissent is the
opposite of treatment and is built into the
contract. Without informed dissent the QOF
would have the intention of coercion. What
the contract actually does is to reward
informed discussion. This counteracts the
chronic care delivery in nurse-led clinics.

The QOF merely provides a framework
for doctors to manage disease. It is the
doctor’s own professional values and
interpretation of the evidence which
determines how that framework is shared
with patients and the joint decisions applied.

Richard Thomas
Senior Clinical Tutor, Primary Care Group,
Medical School, University of Wales, Swansea.
E-mail: R.R.J.Thomas@swansea.ac.uk

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Reading Mangin and Toop’s editorial one
would get the impression that the QOF only
means doom and gloom. No positive effect
is mentioned and the ‘unwanted influence
of the state’ seems near. They suggest a
professional education system with the aim
to improve the quality of care.

This seems a very one-sided view. Is
everything regarding QOF so bad? Reading
June’s BJGP provides a more balanced
impression. At least two articles provide a
positive effect of QOF: Steel et al,2 show the
substantial quality improvement for
incentivised conditions. Tahrani et al,3 saw
significant improvement in diabetes quality
indicators recording. Obviously these
studies have their limitations, yet at the very
least these effects should not go
unmentioned.

However, Mangin and Toop4 do not
seem to look at these studies. Nor do they
offer suggestions about how QOF could be
improved, for example by more input from
the Royal College of General Practitioners’
(RCGP) regarding the evidence base of the
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Henricus GJ van den Heuvel
GP, Medical Centre Gütersloh, Princess Royal
Barracks, BFPO 47, Gütersloh, Germany.
E-mail: rickvandenheuvel@doctors.org.uk

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Mangin and Toop4 provide an interesting
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papers on aspects of QOF in the June issue of BJGP. Their criticisms of QOF make sense from a deontological (duty based) ethical perspective. It is far from clear that medicine is a deontological enterprise any longer.

There is a strong utilitarian perspective on QOF that sees the greatest good of the greatest number of patients as being a worthwhile objective. If this good can be measured then so much the better. (The felicific calculus is achieved.) Outcome measures would be ideal but intermediate process measures will do well enough. ‘Scientific’ measurements have apparently been made, and managers have ‘accurate’ spreadsheets and reports. Politicians can show that their targets have been met and that their ‘investment’ has ‘performed’ well.

Individual GPs can play along with this game and reap the profits from it. So too can pharmaceutical companies, as under-treated illnesses and risk factors are systematically discovered and treated. It can all be justified as there is no shortage of under-treated disease and the rule of halves is so obviously a challenge that needs to be tackled.

General practice to this view is ‘Applied Public Health’, and thequirkiness of individual doctor–patient interactions is all very well, but ultimately stopping patients from smoking, and getting their cholesterol, blood pressure, and glucose levels normal is more important than the messy details of patient’s lives. The patient becomes a means to a public-health goal, not an autonomous individual with their own specific goals. The doctor loses autonomy, and has to document deviance from guidance, rather than being trusted to do what is right in a given situation. Tallis describes this as ‘sessional functionaries robotically following guidelines.’

This utilitarian imperative is in alignment with public health and political imperatives but is directly at odds with a model of medicine based on individual doctors and patients reaching shared understanding of life, events, times, and illness.1 The ideals of patient-centred care, good consultation skills, respect for patient autonomy, the patient as an end in themselves, the doctor as a responsible agent, are all lost to this utilitarian mission. Much of the best general practice work of the last 30 years is rendered impotent under the new contract.2,3

The new contract is a reflection of the democratic deficit and the loss of trust in British medicine. Instead of trusting professionals to do their jobs properly we have now lost toleration for error, and instead we are subjected to the external tyrannies of measurement and regulation. Goodhart’s Law is in full flow. In time the measures used for QOF will cease to measure anything. However, for now the utilitarians are in the ascendand, and as a GP I will use my QOF score to get through appraisals and revalidation, and to earn some money. It is quite clear that I will get next to no credit or recognition for doing real general practice well.

Peter Davies
GP, Keighley Road Surgery, Illingworth, HX2 9LL. E-mail: npgdavies@blueyonder.co.uk

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The editorial by Mangin and Toop3 describes how the QOF has made British GPs into government data collectors and agents of pharmaceutical companies. QOF does not measure our clinical skills or kindness: there are no points for recognising rare diseases at an early stage or in giving sympathy. In medicine, despite all our cleverest scientific advances, all we can do is to influence the process, not the eventual outcome of life, which has an inevitable 100% mortality. A significant part of our role must be to help our patients live their lives to the full. Instead we have made many obsessed with numbers, which they have come to regard as the keys to happiness and eternal life, not realising that what we measure are merely fluctuating bio-statistics. To retain the enormous confidence invested in us by our patients, it is imperative that we keep our critical and clinical skills, honed by our professional training, and use them to the benefit of our patients to provide the best advice and medical care we can in the interest of their individual wellbeing. This surely is the real value of general practice and the art of being a healer.

Bridget Osborne
Tyddyn Ucha, Glan Conway, Colwyn Bay, LL28 5PN. E-mail: bvosborne@doctors.org.uk

CONFIDENTIALITY ON WARD ROUNDS

I have a little anecdote relating to ‘Confidentiality in the Waiting Room’ by Scott, et al.4 I myself call patients into my consulting room using first and last names. The person who responds is not always who I called, so I often ask them to confirm their address or DOB once they are in. While this is not very confidential, I am not aware of any specific complaints from the patients as yet, and I know of no better way to get them in at the right time, apart from ‘Next please’, and then having to ask them who they are.

However, I remember a ward round in a certain hospital once, where the usual entourage started the round at bed one: consultant, junior doctors (two), myself the student, ward sister and two nurses. The patients were all lying tidily in or on their beds in regimenated readiness. One of the patients in the first bay was unable to walk, due to having a ‘drip’, and therefore having been tied down, but by the time we got to the fourth bed in the second bay, the ‘entourage’ had been augmented by the first six mobile patients. As we left the bay and moved towards the double doors that separated the men from the female end of the ward, all six dutifully returned to their own beds, and the two male nurses went to attend to the bedridden patient.

The same happened in the female ward, except that the only males present were the medical staff, of course.

I suppose it was not terribly good for confidentiality, but it did mean that the other patients on the ward knew exactly what was wrong with their neighbours, (due to various nationalities of the staff, the