



Is Health Services Research Important for Surgeons?

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Keywords

- Health services research
- Surgical outcomes research
- Health care outcomes
- Quality improvement

Key points

- Health services research (HSR), also known as surgical outcomes research, is an important and expanding field that examines health care delivery and outcomes in the real world.
- Traditional measures of quality care in HSR include health system structures, processes, and outcomes.
- A variety of research domains exist within HSR to evaluate health care delivery at the patient, hospital, and policy levels.
- Important domains in HSR include comparative effectiveness research, quality improvement, patient safety, and cost-effectiveness analyses.
- With increasing emphasis placed on the provision of economic, high-quality care, surgeons will be well positioned as leaders in their health systems if they are familiar with HSR techniques.

INTRODUCTION

Health services research (HSR) has expanded dramatically in the recent decades, particularly in surgery. Clinicians have access to increasing volumes of data via large national datasets as well as their own institutional records

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via electronic medical record (EMR) systems. These data lend themselves to the analysis of health care delivery and outcomes in the real world, which is the cornerstone of HSR as the authors describe in this article. Further, there is increasing external pressure on surgeons by government and regulatory agencies to provide high-quality, economic care. HSR will allow surgeons to evaluate the care they currently provide, to identify areas for improvement, and, ultimately, to prove that the care they provide is high quality. At the end of the day, all surgeons are invested in providing the best care possible to their individual patients; HSR is a practical, applied field with the same goal.

SIGNIFICANCE OF HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH FOR SURGEONS

Defining health services research

The goal of medical research is to improve patient care. Numerous fields of study exist within medical research, and each field is uniquely suited to address certain research questions. Basic science research aims to elucidate the underlying biological mechanisms of health and disease. Clinical research aims to determine the best treatment of a given disease by comparing therapies. HSR examines patients in a broader context that includes the physician, the hospital, and the health care system at large.

One of the most widely accepted definitions of HSR was published by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) in 2002:

Health services research examines how people get access to health care, how much care costs, and what happens to patients as a result of this care. The main goals of health services research are to identify the most effective ways to organize, manage, finance, and deliver high quality care, reduce medical errors, and improve patient safety [1].

HSR within surgery is also referred to as *surgical outcomes research*. This field of study has expanded dramatically in recent years. In the United States, major changes in health policy have occurred at the federal level. Priorities are shifting to value outcomes and patient perception of care; surgeons will be compensated based on their ability or failure to deliver high-quality, economic care. HSR is uniquely suited to evaluate existing care models and to guide future changes and improvements to the health care delivery system.

A framework for health sciences research: structure, process, and outcomes

Donabedian [2] provided the framework for HSR in 1966 in a landmark publication that defined a scheme to measure the quality of care. This framework is composed of 3 elements: structures, processes, and outcomes, as seen in Fig. 1.

Structure

Medical care as experienced by patients is the sum of numerous components organized into a larger health care delivery system. *Structural measures* of a health care system include both the concrete resources in that system, like staff and

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