

A lean revolution in healthcare productivity

Responding to the demand for improved productivity in the healthcare sector, the APO is conducting a demonstration project on Lean Applications in the Healthcare Industry in collaboration with the Thailand Productivity Institute (FTPI) and Institute of Hospital Quality Improvement and Accreditation (THA). Launched at Suratthani Hospital in southern Thailand on 1 September 2008, the demonstration project utilizes lean methodology to address the current key challenge of healthcare providers: the lack of quality standards for service, safety, and cost-efficiency.

Lean methodology is based on three key concepts: waste reduction; just-in-time (taking-time) operations; and process leveling (eliminating batch processing for one-piece flow). Lean design facilitates waste elimination from processes, allowing them the flexibility to satisfy customer requirements. The project was first envisioned by THA Director Dr. Anuwat Supachutikul, who approached the FTPI to develop a program to assist local hospitals in reengineering their operations to increase productivity and thus the quality of the entire sector. As a measure of its support, the APO deputed Lead Expert Dr. Kelvin Loh, National University Hospital, Singapore. Dr. Loh undertook the task with the support of 10 core trainees assigned by the FTPI and THA. Eighty healthcare providers comprise lean teams in the five demonstration hospitals. These lean teams will become future trainers over the nine to 15 months of the project.

The project itself is a series of exercises involving diagnosis, mission and goal setting, training in lean thinking, project planning and implementation, and concluding with a forum for national and regional healthcare providers. The diagnostic exercises, as the first step, were completed from 1 to 5 September. The first training workshop on lean implementation took place in Bangkok, 23–26 September. The lean teams are currently in the implementation stage with the lead expert, FTPI, and APO continuously monitoring progress and communicating with the teams.



The core lean team demonstrating the “L for lean” sign

“The APO demonstration project modality provides a comprehensive, sustainable springboard for embedding productivity tools in various sites,” said Dr. Loh. According to him, the primary benefits of lean applications in healthcare include more patient-centered care, customized service, improved quality of patients’ time and experience, and error control, resulting in better service and safety for patients. Dr. Supachutikul mentioned that the THA chose this exercise as a long-term strategy to ensure that healthcare standards remain high and that the productivity movement within the healthcare industry takes off.

The FTPI and THA hope to conduct the national forum in the first half of 2009 and a regional one later. Sharing the valuable experience and know-how with the Asia-Pacific region as a whole would provide multiplier effects beyond the scope of a single demonstration project. 