



Neil Westwood

# Lean is a win-win situation

LEAN THINKING HAS been used in the manufacturing and service sectors for decades, improving quality, safety, productivity and cutting costs. Over the past five years lean thinking has been applied to healthcare processes across the world and recently in the NHS in Hereford, Bolton, Worcestershire and Shrewsbury.

Delays and waste have been significantly reduced in many areas, including wards, theatres, sterile services, pharmacy, admission and discharge, health records, radiology, catering services and supplies. We are also starting to see back-office functions such as finance improve their business processes to provide more reliable services.

Lean seeks to improve flow in the patient journey, eliminating all forms of waste and identifying the least wasteful way to give value to customers. It's about identifying which activities add value to the customer and eliminating tasks that add cost but no value. Rather than add extra resources to solve problems and reduce waiting times, it uses existing resources in a more efficient and effective way.

Demand for lean thinking is high. A recently launched guide from the NHS Institute, *Going lean in the NHS*, attracted 10,000 orders from more than 300 NHS organisations in just two months.

It is important to understand that lean thinking is not a quick fix. It is a well proven business approach to delivering sustainable results. Lean is a long-term survival strategy that requires a change in the culture of an organisation; it is not a cost-cutting exercise or the latest cost improvement programme. Neither is it a short-term remedy for current year deficits, although trusts in turnaround will be able to use it in a systematic way to identify and eliminate waste. This will

improve patient and information flow and help deliver efficiency gains that will make NHS organisations more financially viable.

Lean requires strong leadership. Finance leaders have a fundamental role to play in leading change in their organisations and building the support and capability needed for a successful lean culture. Commissioners and NHS trusts need to work together to design sustainable healthcare services that will consistently deliver safe and reliable care at lower cost.

Leaders need to understand patient flows, information and financial flows through their organisation. They need to move from traditional hierarchical management structures and individual departments working in isolation to a situation in which teams understand the whole system and optimise the whole patient journey rather than optimising individual parts of a complicated healthcare system.

By understanding the whole patient journey and demand for services, resources will be used more effectively and better decisions made. Delays, mistakes and errors will be reduced, improving quality and safety. Productivity will increase and extra capacity created so that NHS staff can take on value-added activities that improve patient care. Staff and patients also stand to benefit from a more stable environment: staff morale will increase and sickness rates fall, reducing agency staff costs. Lean is a win-win situation.

• For more information, visit [www.institute.nhs.uk/lean](http://www.institute.nhs.uk/lean)

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