

System Level Measures approach familiar territory for Canterbury December 2016

Canterbury's district health alliance, the Canterbury Clinical Network (CCN), believes System Level Measures and their contributory measures provide the Canterbury health system with a wonderful opportunity to strengthen its collective efforts to improve health outcomes for the population and focus on local priorities.

CCN Alliance Leadership Team member Professor Les Toop says the outcomes-focus of the System Level Measures framework is consistent with the approach already being taken across the Canterbury health system.

"The idea of taking a system-wide view and building primary–secondary care relationships and getting consumer involvement is not new.

"In Canterbury, we've tracked performance in this way for years through a shared outcomes framework. The System Level Measures framework extends this approach and really resonates with what we are already doing."

Benefits of a mature alliance

The Ministry of Health says the Canterbury district's improvement plan is one of several 'exemplar' plans. Prof Toop attributes this partly to having a mature alliance.

"Ours was one of the first health alliances in New Zealand – formalised in 2010. It is now very broad and includes a number of service level alliances.¹ We have good clinical governance systems set up and have been looking at many of the localised measures that we identified in the plan such as polypharmacy for more than a decade.

"So there's a machinery already there; you're not starting from scratch. Given that, it's then a matter of mapping the System Level Measures to what we are already doing."

He says developing an improvement plan would be a lot more challenging for new alliances.

"If you're starting from scratch, there's more work to do. You have to build relationships, set your local objectives and agree what it is you're trying to achieve." He says the current System Level Measures are just the start of the process.

"For health systems starting from scratch the localised contributory measures are really just a reason for getting the structures set up that allow you to monitor the whole system. If you set up the governance structures to deal with these, they enable a much wider view to be taken."

Prof Toop says having dedicated staff from across the health system working on the System Level Measures framework has also been integral to putting together a strong improvement plan.

¹ Under the Canterbury Clinical Network, a number of local service level alliances and workstreams have been established to improve the quality of care, reduce the time people spend waiting and support the delivery of services closer to home.

Developing the improvement plan

As a first step in developing the plan, a CCN System Level Measures working group worked with PHOs, DHBs, analysts, planning and funding and other alliance partners to clarify expectations and decide on the approach to be taken to identify contributory measures and milestones.

A workshop was then held with delegates from across the system. The data was reviewed and debated, and agreement reached on appropriate local measures.

“We looked at how we would approach the development of the plan and how we would mesh it with what was already in place,” says Prof Toop. “We made a decision about the initiatives we consider business as usual, and the new ones that needed some extra effort.

“For example, there is already a lot of work underway to reduce acute admissions. Whereas, if you take ambulatory sensitive hospitalisations for children, and have a good look at the data, it is quickly obvious that we have a disparity in terms of which children end up in hospital and with what.

“Our data show a higher number of Pacific children with respiratory infections – so that is something we need to work on. What is the reason for the difference, are the infections preventable, what can we do to make a change? Then you decide which group would be the right one to have a look at that.

“It ties into what happens when children end up in the emergency department. Paediatrics is also important – those are the discussions that will have to go on. We will need to look in more detail at the data – for example, is this all a weekend phenomenon, is it an afterhours phenomenon, is it because people are by-passing the practice and going straight to the hospital because that’s what they believe is the right thing to do?

“So you have to understand first, A: is there a problem, B: what is the problem, what are the underlying things, what’s modifiable, and then how do we modify it?”

Prof Toop says the alliance has taken a bold approach to addressing amenable mortality rates.

“We’ve said we are not interested in individual organs – we are not going down the diabetes, heart etc road because the common theme for pretty much all of these things is diet, lifestyle and a healthy environment. So it is better to put our efforts into these areas.”

He says once local measures were agreed, baselines were set and clinically-led groups appointed to lead specific activities. Specific and targeted groups were then supported to develop actions to achieve the contributory measure goals and guide ongoing development.

The impact of clinical leadership

Kim Sinclair-Morris, programme director for the CNN, says clinical leadership has been essential in the development of the systems improvement plan.

“There has been very strong clinical leadership across the process. Having content knowledge relating to the System Level Measures and contributory measures has been really important.

“Les has taken the role of championing the System Level Measures through the process – facilitating the workshop, leading conversations at meetings and providing expert guidance in the writing of the plan.

“Leadership across the system is particularly important. You need to extend the reach as far as possible to make sure there is ownership across the system. Broad involvement and clinical leadership supports everyone across our health system to feel confident that this is the right thing to do and that we’re going down the right path.”

She says it has also been invaluable to work with the service level alliances and the expert groups throughout the process, and check things off with them.

“These groups will now drive implementation of the system levels measures; they will bring them to life.”

Consumers were interwoven throughout the process by virtue of their presence on service level alliances, the Alliance Leadership Team, in alliance groups and at PHO and DHB level.

Prof Toop says to make a difference to people’s health it is vital to understand the data.

“You need clinicians and analysts looking at the data together, and we do that on a regular basis. It means there is an iterative process where analysts can break it down by ethnicity, age, geography and so on in front of you. It’s very efficient and it’s also quite addictive for the clinicians, they love it!”

The challenge of time pressure

He says one of the challenges of developing the improvement plan was time pressures.

“It’s a time-consuming process. The people who get involved in this are all busy anyway, so that’s why you need dedicated support people. You need commitment from the DHB to support people’s time to work on the plan and to fund the alliance.

“It also takes time to undertake the processes that are true and effective engagement, within the alliance but also with other groups such as Māori and Pacific and consumers. It takes time to get that true ownership.

“The very tight timeframe was a challenge and thinking ahead, there needs to be more time to enable that process to take place.”

Kim Sinclair-Morris says the Canterbury health system puts the patient at the centre and this has been an invaluable ‘check’ during the process.

“If people are approaching the System Level Measures work with a particular view, always putting the patient and the needs of our community at the centre can really change the discussion in a positive, outcomes-focused way.”

The Canterbury health system improvement plan is available here:
www.ccn.health.nz/SystemImprovementPlan.