Instructions The Fishbone Diagram is a tool for conducting a Root Cause Analysis. It allows you to identify specific drivers of a disparity in a single chart. It is important to have multiple key stakeholders participate, including patients and their caregivers, community representatives, state Medicaid and Medicaid managed care organization representatives, and a variety of care team members (e.g., physicians, nurses, community health workers, medical office assistants, registration staff, and patient service representatives).

Step 1: Review the Key Considerations Document to keep in mind as you complete your root cause analysis.

Step 2: Start by stating your problem in the form of a question, and place it at the head of your fishbone diagram. The problem should align directly with a disparity you identified through stratifying and analyzing your demographic (e.g. REL or SOGI) data. For example, “Why do Black patients with diabetes have lower rates of foot examinations than White patients?”

You can start with either a health outcome or a clinical process measure.

- Starting with a health outcome will allow you to be as inclusive as possible and to see the big picture. It can take longer to see a reduction in health outcomes than it would to change processes of care.
- Starting with a clinical process can yield early wins that inspire the team to continue working toward improving health outcomes, and may be a part of your overall strategy to reduce disparities in health outcomes.

Step 3: Label the other boxes (body of the fish) with categories that answer the question, “What might be contributing to this problem?” Some commonly used categories include, but are not limited to, people (staff, patients, leadership, other stakeholders, etc.), policies, procedures/workflows, equipment/supplies, and environment. For example, “There are a low number of referrals given for foot care” and “Patients don’t feel comfortable asking for a foot exam.”

Step 4: For each category, ask “Why does that happen?” List possible causes and attach them to the appropriate branches.

Step 5: For each cause, again ask “Why does that happen?” Attach that information as another, smaller branch. Keep asking “Why?” and attaching smaller branches until your team agrees that you’ve arrived at a root cause. Make sure you drill down deep enough to get at a true root cause. Don’t stop asking “why” too early, or you may tackle a superficial issue rather than the underlying problem.

- After repeatedly asking “why,” you may come to a point when you’ve identified root causes that are social determinants, like poverty or lack of education. The health care sector can play an important role in mitigating social determinants of health. Think about the ways in which your organization, or a team of organizations, can work with community partners and policymakers to address systemic causes of health disparities and health inequity.

Step 6 Apply an “equity lens.” Think about which root causes contribute to the difference in quality in care and outcomes, not just overall low quality. Highlight the root causes on your fishbone diagram that uniquely impact the population(s) identified in the question at the head of your fishbone. The Key Considerations document will be especially helpful with this step because it will help you think of specific issues involving the three Cs – culture, communication, and context – that are often implicated in disparities.
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