Transferability of Industrial Engineering Methods to the Healthcare Sector

The Danish public healthcare sector is like other healthcare systems under pressure to deliver more and better services. The sector is especially facing three challenges: Firstly, they must increase their efficiency in order to free capacity and support budget reductions. Secondly, they must increase responsiveness of the health care organizations in order to provide patients with rapid diagnostics and treatment. Finally, the quality levels of care and treatment must also be raised. Difficulties in meeting these challenges often result in public criticism and stressed health care workers. With no hope of getting substantial more resources healthcare managers and politicians has begun to look for alternative modes of organization. In doing so the healthcare sector is being exposed to industrial rationalization principles such as lean manufacturing. The question is whether lean opens possibilities for higher efficiency and quality or it just reinforces stress. This question has been studied in three Danish cases in surgery, oncology and home-nurse care, and the results from these case studies are used for a review the use of lean in healthcare. The cases further serve as a basis for discussing the implications of transferring such industrial engineering methods to the healthcare sector. The conclusion of the review suggest that is possible to use lean as an inspiration for improvements of both efficiency, quality and working conditions provided diligent consideration of the particulars of health care organization in comparison with manufacturing industry.

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