Defining standardization within the healthcare industry:
An in-depth analysis of standardization from the perspective of key stakeholders
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Introduction
What does standardization mean to you?

This is a burning question in today’s healthcare industry. However, given that nothing in healthcare is ever simple, there are many answers to this single question.

Individuals interpret standardization in accordance with their own preconceptions. More specifically, key stakeholders such as hospital managers, suppliers, clinicians and patients, have unique views of standardization as it relates to their professional practice or personal experience. Over time, these perceptions have polarized, culminating in a struggle between those who promote standardization and those who oppose it. But in the end, it’s all just a matter of perspective.

Background
As the price of healthcare products continues to rise, hospital administrators have turned to standardization to reduce expenditures by regulating medical devices and negotiating procurement and contracting agreements to obtain competitive pricing from suppliers (Montgomery & Schneller, 2007).

Purpose of Study
With no concrete definition of standardization in healthcare, it is difficult to derive the true meaning behind the concept. However, with health expenditure on the rise, the healthcare industry can no longer afford to be complacent with this culture of ambiguity. For this reason, this study proposes a formal, unified definition of standardization in healthcare, taking into account the perspectives of key stakeholders.

Study Design
This study used a three-pronged approach consisting of a literature review, a survey and key stakeholder interviews.

The literature review included a robust search of 8 different nursing and business databases. Any material discussing standardization definitions, managerial and healthcare professional perceptions, and potential patient impact within the last 10 years were included. Multiple searches were completed in each database to capture relevant literature. The themes arising from the literature were tracked and recorded.

The survey was based on the themes generated from the literature review. There was a strong focus on determining key stakeholder perceptions and definitions of standardization. A total of 75 surveys were returned. Ranking the most frequent responses and consolidating any free text or expanded comments, the survey data was analyzed.

Key stakeholder interviews were completed during the same timeframe as the survey, but consisted of different questions. There were three categories of participants: patients, clinicians and suppliers. Each
category included 10 participants, making a total of 30 interviews. Common themes from each of the three participant classes were identified.

![Figure 1. Visual representation of the study design.](image)

**Results**

The impact of standardization on an individual differs from person to person. Both negative and positive connotations are associated with standardization, and it is important to understand where they come from and why they exist. Therefore, we have examined the various perspectives of key stakeholders in healthcare. It is interesting to note that the first hand perspective of key stakeholders gathered from the surveys and interviews vary from the results found in the literature review.

**Supplier Perspective**

*Literature:* Suppliers see standardization as a logical method of cost reduction. They have difficulty looking beyond the financial implications of standardization to its potential patient impact (Neil, 2005).

*Survey and Interview:* 84% of suppliers listed cost savings as the main component of standardization. However, of those suppliers, 79% indicated that patient safety must also be taken into consideration. Therefore, although the suppliers maintain that standardization focuses on cost savings, they also recognize the importance of patient care outcomes.

**Hospital Management Perspective**

*Literature:* Hospital management sees standardization as a means of efficiency associated with an “overall good” (Ellingsen, 2004). They believe that standardization fosters an environment of quality patient care by creating a workplace that is resilient to inevitable human error with the benefit of reduced expenditure (Clarke, 2007).
Survey and Interview: 100% of hospital management appoints efficiency as the main benefit of standardization. However, they acknowledge that there is a limit to standardization. They recognize that when clinicians feel a product is inadequate, it affects the success of their practice and negatively impacts patient care. Therefore, they believe that efficiency needs to be balanced with product quality in order to reap the benefits of standardization.

Physician Perspective
Literature: Physicians see standardization as a means of control (Ellingsen, 2004). Due to the autonomous nature of their profession, it is difficult for physicians to accept standardization especially when it goes against their own interests (Ellingsen, 2004).

Survey and Interview: 96% of clinicians (including physicians) and suppliers recognize that physicians are unsupportive of standardization. Physicians indicate that, at times, they feel as if standardization is forced upon them without appropriate rationale. However, they are willing to standardize if the initiatives are well supported in evidence-based practice and are implemented in a way that presents clear justification for the proposed changes.

Nursing Perspective
Literature: Nurses see standardization as means of saving time (Rodkin, 2007). Standardization removes variation of medical supplies so that less time is spent hunting for proper equipment or replacing inadequate medical materials, and more time is spent with patients, performing actual nursing care (Rodkin, 2007).

Survey and Interview: 93% of nurses indicate that cost savings is the driving force behind standardization, while 85% find efficiency to be an important factor, and only 50% indicate that patient safety plays a role in standardization. Although nurses understand the benefit of standardization from a savings perspective, both in dollars and in time, they do not truly believe that it is done for the benefit of the patient. To ensure that standardization is completed in a responsible manner, nurses want more of a voice in the standardization process.

Patient Perspective
Literature: Patients are made to bear the impact of standardization as it affects their quality of care (Kurtin & Stucky, 2009). Patients’ perception of quality of care can influence their overall health outcomes (Reeves et al., 2008). The literature suggests that the effect of standardization on the practice and demeanor of clinicians can directly affect patient care outcomes (Reeves et al., 2008).

Survey and Interview: 70% of patients believe that clinicians are the predominate supporters of standardization. Patients have faith that standardization is done for their benefit. As a result, they indicate that clinicians should be the most vested parties involved in standardization since it is their practice which is most affected by it. In general, patients agree that standardization is appropriate when it benefits the majority of the population, without compromising care.
Conclusions

Standardization is a misunderstood term in the healthcare industry. With hospital budgets getting tighter, standardization is ideal for operating under cost constraints. But the negativity associated with the term makes it difficult for suppliers and hospital management to promote standardization to clinical end users.

However, these misinterpretations may be cleared up. Findings from the literature review, survey, and interviews have indicated that standardization is not an inherently negative term; it is simply misunderstood. To unify the healthcare industry in their understanding of standardization, we propose the following definition to best describe it’s meaning:

**Standardization is the process by which healthcare products/services are chosen by a committee of key stakeholders, taking into account evidence-based results, to ensure quality patient care while adhering to fiscal responsibility.**
After having read this poster, ask yourself one more time:
What does standardization mean to you?

Acknowledgements
We would like to thank Medbuy and Baxter for providing funding for this project.

Further Information
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Literature Cited


