

PS2.237

Exploring why quality circles work in primary health care: a realist review

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Background: Quality Circles are commonly used in primary health care in Europe to consider and improve standard practice over time. They represent a complex social intervention that occurs within the fast-changing system of primary health care. Numerous controlled trials, reviews and studies have shown small but unpredictable positive effect sizes on behaviour change. Although Quality Circles seem to be effective, it is not clear how the results are achieved and which of their components result in behaviour changes of health care professionals. This realist synthesis examines how configurations of components and contextual features of Quality Circles influence their performance.

Methods: Stakeholder interviews and a scoping search revealed the processes of Quality Circles and helped describe their core components and underlying theories. A purposive and systematic search followed by selection and extraction of appropriate data helped identify configurations of contexts and mechanisms which influence Quality Circle outcomes. We grouped studies by similar propositional statements in order to identify patterns. Chaining of outcomes helped developing a program theory that was tested among stakeholders using realist interviews and focus groups. The revised theory was then tested in literature and compared to existing theories in the literature.

Results: The findings of the synthesis should enable the improvement of Quality Circle performance. Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) patterns reveal how Quality Circles work and how contextual factors interact to influence their outcome. Stakeholder interviews revealed a preliminary program theory that could be refined iteratively using literature and further interviews with stakeholders.

Conclusion: Due to stakeholder participation the research question could be narrowed. Interviews fostered identification of preliminary program theories and improved the understanding of CMO patterns that were revealed in the literature search. This deeper understanding of the program components and importance of contextual features should facilitate the improvement of Quality Circle performance.