

Policy Brief

Implementation of Health and Social care Standards

Summary: Internationally, there is evidence of sub-optimal care with approximately 60% of healthcare delivered according to best evidence. The implementation of health and social care standards is a well-recognised lever for quality improvements in health systems. This policy brief describes research which examined the literature reporting on enablers and barriers to implementing health and social care standards. ‘Knowledge’ and ‘resources’ were the most influencing factors identified across enablers and barriers. There is a gap in the research relating to system-level perspectives to implementing standards. This policy brief recommends a need to have a convergence of ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ perspectives to adopt a whole system approach to implementing health and social care standards. Moreover, system level input is needed to support enablers to implementing standards in everyday practice.

“Standards are a set of high-level outcomes that describe how services can achieve safe, quality, person-centred care and support. They are evidence-based and informed by engaging with those who use and provide our health and social care services.” (Health Information and Quality Authority, 2022)¹

Why is implementation of health and social care standards important?

There is evidence of sub-optimal care in health systems, with appropriately 60% of health care delivered according to best evidence.² Harm caused to patients is estimated as the fourteenth leading cause of international disease burden.³ The World Health Organisation and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development recommend implementing standards as a quality improvement intervention in health systems.⁴ The implementation of standards promotes a consistent level of care, quality assurance, and an understanding of what quality, safe practice looks like for people using health and social care services and service providers.⁵

What is the issue with implementation of health and social care standards?

Standards are complex interventions that involve multiple actions and behaviours from stakeholders across all levels in health and social care. Challenges exist when implementing standards in everyday practice. For example, limitations in human resources, time constraints and lengthy documents have been reported as barriers to implementation from standard-setting bodies internationally.^{6,7} Conversely, educative materials and stakeholder engagements have been reported as enablers to implementing standards.⁶ These are also referred to as implementation strategies or methods that can overcome barriers and enhance implementation. An understanding of these factors, be they enablers or barriers, can positively influence the implementation of health and social care standards.

What did we do?

We conducted a review of the literature to identify and describe enablers and barriers to implementing standards, in order to inform the selection of implementation strategies to address these and subsequently support the delivery of safe, quality, evidence-based care. We examined published studies that reported on enablers and barriers to implementing nationally or internationally endorsed health and social care standards. Our aim was to answer the following research question: *what are the enablers and barriers to implementing health and social care standards?*

What did we find?

We found 35 studies that were conducted in 11 countries. The studies cumulatively examined 32 healthcare standards, three social care standards and two mental healthcare standards. The studies represent the analysis of 847 documents, for example, patient charts and notes, and 13,679 participants. Of this 13,679 sample, 308 represented individuals at system level for example, government representatives and academic professionals, 1,920 were service-users, and the remainder were individuals working at service management and frontline level.

The examination identified 22 enablers and 24 barriers to implementing standards. We presented these enablers and barriers as thematic summaries of the literature across health systems internationally. In addition, we quantified these thematic summaries to measure their prevalence across the literature. We are presenting herein the three most prevalent enablers and barriers across the studies, all of which relate to knowledge and resources.

Of **31 studies** reporting **enablers** to implementing health and social care standards:



17 (55%) reported that *services use support tools at local level to prompt compliance, improve performances and assure effective implementation of Standards.*



16 (52%) reported *recruitment and availability of staff such as designated personnel who act as champions and role models are key elements to implementation of Standards.*



16 (52%) reported that *services have training courses to increase awareness and knowledge of the Standards and help implement the Standards.*

Of **35 studies** reporting **barriers** to implementing health and social care standards:



22 (63%) reported that *services have a lack of knowledge, awareness and understanding of what Standards are.*



16 (46%) reported that *services are experiencing staffing constraints that act as a barrier to complying with Standards.*



15 (43%) reported that *services have insufficient funds, causing resource issues and competing tenders for safety and quality projects impacting on implementing the Standards.*

Our conclusions

The most prevalent factors that influence the implementation of standards in health and social care services are knowledge, funding and workforce. Targeted support for enablers identified in this review will help to overcome the barriers and subsequently benefit the implementation of health and social care standards.

The implementation of health social care standards requires a whole system approach. Our findings reflect perspectives and experiences of enablers and barriers at frontline and service management level. As such, there is a need to include system-level enablers and barriers which are typically studied under policy implementation research.

Policy Recommendations

- Converge policy implementation research and implementation science to adopt a whole system approach to implementing health and social care standards.
- Provide system level supports and investment for health and social care services to address influencing factors to implementing health and social care standards, such as targeted staff training and sufficient workforce.
- Build capacity across health and social care services by advancing knowledge and skills to implement health and social care standards.

Scan the QR code to read our published study that describes this review of the literature: Kelly Y, O'Rourke N, Flynn R, O'Connor L, Hegarty J. Factors that influence the implementation of (inter)nationally endorsed health and social care standards: a systematic review and meta-summary. *BMJ Quality & Safety*. Available from: <https://www.10.1136/bmjqs-2022-015287>



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Authors

Yvonne Kelly,^a Niamh O'Rourke,^a Rachel Flynn,^a Laura O'Connor,^a Josephine Hegarty^b

^aHealth Information and Quality Authority, ^bCatherine McAuley School of Nursing and Midwifery, University College Cork

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