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Variability in health care quality measurement among studies using Service Provision Assessment data from low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review

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#### Abstract

Quality of care is essential for improving health outcomes – but heterogeneity in theoretical frameworks and metrics can limit studies' generalizability and comparability. This research aimed to compare definitions of care quality across research papers that incorporate data from Service Provision Assessment (SPA) surveys. Following PRISMA guidelines, we used a keyword search in PubMed. Each author reviewed abstracts, then full texts, for inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed publications of empirical analysis using SPA data. The search yielded 3250 unique abstracts and 34 publications were included in the final analysis. We extracted details on the SPA dataset(s) used, theoretical framework applied, and how care quality was operationalized. The 34 included papers used SPA data from 14 surveys in 9 countries (all in sub-Saharan Africa plus Haiti). One-third of these papers (n=13) included no theoretical or conceptual framework for care quality. Among those papers referencing a framework, the most common was the Donabedian model (n=7). Studies operationalized quality constructs in extremely different ways. Few papers included Outcomes as a quality construct, and the operationalization of Structure varied widely. A key asset of SPA surveys, owing to the standardized structure and use of harmonized data collection instruments, is the potential for cross-survey comparisons. However, this is limited by the lack of a common framework for measuring and reporting quality in the existing literature using SPA data. SPA surveys offer unique and valuable insights, and a common framework and approach would substantially strengthen the body of knowledge on quality of care in low-resource settings.

### 1 Introduction

Quality of care is necessary for improving health outcomes<sup>1</sup>. Low-quality health systems may be responsible for up to 8.6 million deaths annually in low- and middle-income countries: i.e., these deaths could have been averted with utilization of high-quality care<sup>2</sup>. Improvements in population health will require high-quality health care over the lifespan, as global life expectancy increases and is accompanied by a growing burden of chronic non-communicable disease<sup>3, 4</sup>. This is particularly true in the context of Universal Health Coverage<sup>5, 6</sup>.

8

The definition of "quality of care" has evolved over several decades. A seminal definition of 9 health care quality was developed by Avedis Donabedian (1966), and is a widely-used model for 10 measuring care quality as a function of structure, process, and outcomes<sup>7</sup>. In the 1990s, Judith Bruce and 11 12 Anrudh Jain introduced a framework for assessing family planning care quality that focused on the client perspective<sup>8</sup>. Subsequent definitions and frameworks for identifying and measuring elements of quality 13 14 have also been expanded and refined by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>9</sup>, including IOM's quality of care framework that identifies six domains of health 15 care quality<sup>10</sup>, and WHO's framework for quality of maternal and newborn care<sup>11</sup>. Definitions are not 16 17 merely semantic; they serve as foundation for conceptual frameworks, which in turn can inform research by identifying variables of interest, formulating hypotheses for the connections between these, and 18 devising ways to operationalize variables during data collection and analysis<sup>12, 13, 14</sup>. 19

20

One approach to measuring care quality in global health is the Service Provision Assessment (SPA) survey, which is administered by the Demographic and Health Surveys program. SPA surveys systematically collect information about health facilities in participating countries<sup>15</sup>, are nationally representative, and have been conducted in 12 countries since 2004 (20 surveys have been conducted in total). (Prior to 2004, SPA surveys were focused on specific constructs only, such as HIV care or maternal and child health.) A key strength of SPA surveys is the use of standardized data collection tools, which

enables multi- and cross-country analyses<sup>16</sup>; and the comprehensive collection of information from
several sources: health facility infrastructure, health workers, availability of specific health services,
components of clinical care (as directly observed by data collectors), and client opinions of services
received. SPA surveys have 4 overarching aims: to describe service availability; to describe readiness to
provide services (infrastructure, resources, support systems); to assess whether standards of care (quality,
content) are followed during service delivery; and whether clients and providers are satisfied<sup>15</sup>.

33

The objective of this analysis was to examine how care quality has been studied using SPA data. 34 Measurement of quality is important for the global community, and is a key objective of SPA surveys. 35 There have been other systematic reviews of quality of care measurement using SPA data, but these have 36 been narrowly topic-specific (e.g., maternal and child health care or family planning only <sup>17, 18, 19</sup>). We 37 38 took a broader approach in conducting a systematic review of the literature to collate all information on how SPA data have been used to study quality of care, including theoretical frameworks and definitions 39 40 employed, and how these have been operationalized. Although there are a number of existing health facility assessment tools <sup>20</sup>. SPA surveys include a broad capture of data elements reflecting different 41 42 aspects of care quality (including facility assessments, interviews with health workers, observations of 43 care delivery and counseling practices, and exit interview with clients) across multiple types of health services, and are publicly available and widely used, so constituted the tool of interest here. 44

45

#### 46 Methods

*Literature search*: Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis
(PRISMA) guidelines, we used a keyword search for papers published since 2004 (the date of the first
comprehensive, i.e. not topic-specific, SPA survey) in PubMed. (See search details in Appendix 1.) The
search was conducted in January 2018. No language restriction was applied. All results were exported to
Covidence software, and duplicates were removed.

53	Article selection: Each author reviewed abstracts and deemed whether the abstract should be excluded.
54	The criterion for exclusion was if a paper clearly did not use SPA data for an empirical analysis that was
55	published as a peer-reviewed article. The first 10% of titles and abstracts were screened by both authors,
56	to attain inter-rater reliability; after this, the authors screened independently. Next, for non-excluded
57	abstracts, full texts were retrieved for these publications. Each author reviewed a portion of these full
58	texts (using the same exclusion criteria); 10% of full texts were screened by both authors before
59	independent screening. Non-English language publications were translated using Google Translate.
60	
61	Data extraction: CM extracted data from the eligible full-text publications based on a pre-defined data
62	extraction form. Covidence software was used for data extraction. Data elements extracted were: details
63	on the SPA dataset(s) used in the article, theoretical framework applied, and how care quality was
64	operationalized.
65	
66	Data analysis: Informed by the Donabedian framework, the variables used to operationalize care quality
67	in each article were classified as relating to the constructs of Structure, Process, or Outcomes. Within
67 68	in each article were classified as relating to the constructs of Structure, Process, or Outcomes. Within Structure, 6 key domains were then identified: infrastructure; staffing; service availability; supplies,
68	Structure, 6 key domains were then identified: infrastructure; staffing; service availability; supplies,
68 69	Structure, 6 key domains were then identified: infrastructure; staffing; service availability; supplies, medicines, equipment; monitoring; and protocols and guides. The specific variables or data elements
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68 69 70 71 72 73	Structure, 6 key domains were then identified: infrastructure; staffing; service availability; supplies, medicines, equipment; monitoring; and protocols and guides. The specific variables or data elements referenced in every included article were mapped to each of these domains, plus the domains within Process and Outcomes. These were tallied, and counts were compared across constructs and domains. <b>Results</b>
68 69 70 71 72 73 74	Structure, 6 key domains were then identified: infrastructure; staffing; service availability; supplies, medicines, equipment; monitoring; and protocols and guides. The specific variables or data elements referenced in every included article were mapped to each of these domains, plus the domains within Process and Outcomes. These were tallied, and counts were compared across constructs and domains. <b>Results</b> The search strategy yielded 3250 unique abstracts to review; after screening abstracts, 2910 were
68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75	Structure, 6 key domains were then identified: infrastructure; staffing; service availability; supplies, medicines, equipment; monitoring; and protocols and guides. The specific variables or data elements referenced in every included article were mapped to each of these domains, plus the domains within Process and Outcomes. These were tallied, and counts were compared across constructs and domains. <b>Results</b> The search strategy yielded 3250 unique abstracts to review; after screening abstracts, 2910 were excluded and 340 were selected for full-text screening (Figure 1). Ultimately 34 studies were included in

80	The number of publications using SPA data to explore quality of care has increased dramatically
81	over time (Figure 2). There is also increasing use of multiple SPA modules: health facility and provider
82	interviews (corresponding to Structure aspects of quality), service observation (Process aspects of
83	quality), and client exit interview (contributed to Process and Outcome aspects of quality). All but one
84	included paper used the facility interview dataset, 21 used the provider interview dataset, 18 used at least
85	one observation dataset, and 12 used the exit interview dataset.
86	
87	The Kenya 2010 SPA dataset was most commonly used (in over half of the included papers), and
88	approximately 30% of papers used Tanzania 2006, Namibia 2009, Rwanda 2007 or Uganda 2007 (see
89	Appendix 3 for per-survey counts). There are some SPA surveys that did not appear in our search results
90	(i.e., Bangladesh 2014 and Nepal 2015). Just over half (56%, n=19) of the included publications used just
91	one SPA dataset, while the remaining 44% (n=15) used more than one; this exact pattern held even
92	among the most recent papers (published in 2016 and 2017: 12 were single-survey papers and 10 were
93	multi-country papers).
94	
95	One-third of included papers (n=13, 38%) was informed by no theoretical or conceptual
96	framework for care quality. Among those papers referencing a framework (n=21), the most common was
97	the Donabedian model (used by 7 studies); an additional 12 studies used alternative existing frameworks,
98	such as the WHO quality of care framework for maternal and newborn care <sup>11</sup> ; the Primary Health Care
99	Performance Initiative Framework (PHCPI) <sup>21</sup> , and WHO "building blocks" of health systems
100	framework <sup>22</sup> ; and 2 defined their own framework. Since the Donabedian framework was the most
101	common in these articles and is broadly applicable (not service-specific), we use it to organize and report
102	on quality constructs from all articles in this review.
103	

104	Most papers used quality-related measures relating to structure (n=29) and/or process (n=24),
105	while far fewer (n=11) included measures related to outcomes (Table 1). (Although SPA surveys do not
106	capture outcomes as defined by the Donabedian framework, i.e., changes in health status, they include
107	data on the patient experience which is how outcomes are characterized in this analysis.) Only 9 articles
108	included variables that captured all three of these constructs; the rest mentioned only one (n=12) or two
109	(n=13).
110	Structure
111	Among the 30 papers that considered Structure as a quality construct, the most common domains
112	were supplies/medicines, staffing, infrastructure and availability of services (Table 1). Papers commonly
113	used the World Health Organization Service Availability and Readiness Assessment (SARA)
114	methodology for reporting Structure elements <sup>23</sup> ; the "readiness" component of SARA measures include
115	information about inputs required for general readiness, and for providing specific types of services
116	(availability of clinical guidelines, diagnostic tools, medicines, trained health workers) Across all papers,
117	30 structure variables were mentioned. At most, articles discussed 24 structure variables; the average
118	number was 8 and the median was 6. Articles about antenatal care and primary health care incorporated
119	(on average and median) slightly more structure variables than papers on other types of services, but there
120	was vast heterogeneity in all service types (Appendix 4).
121	

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		Number of studies
Domain	Variable	including this variable
STRUCTURE	(n=30)	
	Water	n=16
	Ambulance/transport/referral	n=14
	Telephone/communication	n=13
	Electricity/light	n=13
	Infection control/waste or sharps disposal	n=13
Infrastructure	Soap/gloves	n=11
minastructure	Toilet/latrine	n=9
	Privacy	n=7
	Waiting area/room	n=6
	Cleanliness	n=5
	Adequate storage	n=1
	Other†	n=4
	Recently-trained staff	n=15
	Availability of trained personnel	n=10
Staffing	Number of personnel	n=5
	Years of experience	n=2
~ .	Other‡	n=6
Service	Service-specific availability	n=14
availability	Times/days services are available	n=11
<b>a</b> 1'	Item availability (medicines; supplies)	n=23
Supplies,	Inventory or stock ledger maintained	n=5
equipment,	Product organization: by expiration date	n=4
medicines	Product storage: protected Other*	n=4 n=3
		n=3 n=10
	Recent supervisory supervision visit Management meetings held/system for	n=10 n=10
	reviewing management issues	11-10
Monitoring	QA/monitoring system in place	n=9
Womtoring	Client feedback system in place	n=9 n=8
	Use HMIS/other database	n=7
	Client cards used	n=7 n=2
Protocols,	Guidelines/protocols available/visible	n=12
guides	Visual/teaching aids available/used	n=6
PROCESS (n=		•
	l or care procedures implemented	n=24
Use of recordk	· · ·	n=5
Service duratio	1 6	n=4
	or handwashing	n=4
	y or assured confidentiality	n=3
Wait time dura		n=2

Client-reported satisfaction with care	n=5
Client-reported intention to return	n=2
Client-reported intention to recommend to friends/family	n=1
Other**	n=3
† Examples of "other" infrastructure: specific person/system for infrastructure incinerator: number of beds	re repair/maintenance; functioning

‡ Examples of "other" staffing: providers have opportunity for promotion; providers have written job description; providers have received incentives (monetary or non-monetary); providers know opportunities for promotion

\* Examples of "other" supplies and equipment: proper final sterilization process used for medical equipment; medication stocking frequency; staff knowledge of processing time for equipment \*\* Examples of "other" outcomes: correct use of treatment; client knowledge after care

123

125

126 Certain aspects of infrastructure were mentioned much more commonly than others. More than
127 two-thirds of studies reporting on infrastructure discussed availability of water, infection control/safe
128 disposal measures, and an ambulance; while fewer than 40% discussed cleanliness, privacy for clients, or
129 availability of a client waiting area.

Within supplies/medicines, the presence of specific items was the most common representation 130 131 (availability of equipment and/or consumables [medicines, vaccines] was mentioned by 23 articles), but 132 only 4 articles mentioned whether the products were well-stored (organized by expiration date) and 4 mentioned whether storage was protective from the elements or damage. Within the same service type, 133 articles analyzed availability of very different supplies and medicines (Appendix Table 4); for example, 134 only two articles on child health care included data about medicines availability: one only assessed 135 136 availability of antibiotics, and the other included medicines ranging from antibiotics to oral rehydration salts to deworming tablets. Among articles about quality of antenatal care (n=10), all but 3 included 137 138 availability of iron and/or folic acid tablets, but only 4 included antimalarial medications. Training of staff was much more commonly mentioned than availability of staff (e.g., round-the-139 140 clock clinician availability) or number of personnel overall. Most articles that discussed monitoring mentioned supportive supervision visits (n=10) and systems for reviewing management issues (including 141

management meetings) (n=10), but fewer mentioned approaches for eliciting client feedback (n=9) or use
of HMIS or other data systems (n=7).

144

145 <u>Process</u>

There were 24 papers that included Process in their operationalization of care quality (Table 1).
All used variables that captured clinical care components; these were specific to the type of visit (family
planning consultation, antenatal care, childbirth, or sick child care). Different articles, even about the
same type of health service, reported on process to a very different extent and using different indicators.

150 In each category of care type, between 20-33% of included articles mentioned 2 or fewer care activities.

151 See Appendix tables 5-8 for details on all activities included, by service type and per article.

152 Antenatal care: There were 10 articles that used SPA data to investigate quality of antenatal care services,

and 9 of them included variables on specific care activities. Across the included articles, 26 different care

154 activities were identified. The most commonly-reported activities were testing for anemia (n=8), testing

155 for urine protein (n=8), testing for STIs (n=6), measuring blood pressure (n=7), and measuring weight

156 (n=6). Only two articles included all 5 of these common activities. Many components of the WHO

157 essential practice guidelines for antenatal care<sup>24</sup> – including discussing pregnancy history, asking about

danger signs, examining for signs of anemia, and counseling on family planning – were reported by 3 or

159 fewer articles.

these activities (n=20).

175

Childbirth: Among the 12 articles that analyzed quality of childbirth care using SPA data, 11 included 160 161 information about specific care activities; these 11 articles identified a total of 24 unique childbirth care activities. Encouraging immediate breastfeeding (n=7), conducting uterine massage after delivery of the 162 placenta (n=6), ensuring skin-to-skin contact after birth (n=6), and giving oxytocin within one minute of 163 delivery (n=6) were the most frequently-assessed activities, but only two articles included all 4 of these 164 commonly-reported activities. Again, many of the WHO essential practices for childbirth<sup>24</sup> were largely 165 omitted, such as giving the baby vitamin K (n=2), providing antibiotic eye drops or ointment (n=2), and 166 conducting a vaginal exam (n=3). 167

*Pediatrics*: There were 6 articles about sick child care, and 5 of these included information about specific care processes. In total, these 5 articles identified 24 specific care activities. The most frequently reported activities were taking child's temperature (n=3), and asking about child's vaccination history (n=3). Few papers included WHO's Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI)-recommended counseling activities, such as counseling on feeding habits and illness symptoms (n=2), or informing the caretaker of the child's diagnosis (n=2). Most activities were only included once across the five studies (felt for fever, checked for dehydration, asked about child's Vitamin A status); and only 1 paper reported the majority of

176	Family planning: The 9 articles about family planning care quality included 8 that analyzed process; and
177	these 8 articles identified a total of 25 specific family planning care activities. The most commonly
178	reported activities were taking client's reproductive history, blood pressure and weight (n=5), asking
179	about chronic illnesses, smoking habits and STI symptoms (n=5), counseling on proper use of family
180	planning methods (n=4), and ensuring client privacy (n=4). Only 2 papers included activities assessing
181	provider adherence for clinical procedures (for injectable contraceptives or implants). Other
182	recommended counseling practices from the Global Handbook for Family Planning Providers, such as
183	counseling on side effects and/or when to return (n=3), partner's attitude towards family planning (n=2),
184	and method protection against STIs/HIV (n=2) were largely omitted.
185	Additionally, 3 papers touched on issues related to privacy during the visit. Four papers included
186	a variable related to service interaction duration, and 3 looked at wait time. Four looked at hygiene during
187	the visit (provider handwashing and/or wearing gloves) and 5 included a measure of whether the provider
188	referenced the client card or a facility register.
189	

189

#### 190 <u>Outcomes</u>

Only 11 papers included such outcomes when measuring care quality (Table 1). The most common experiential outcome was whether the client reported specific problems relating to services that day (n=8), and whether the client stated they were satisfied with care received (n=5). A smaller number of articles included whether the client said they intended to return for services, and whether they would recommend the care to family or friends. Other outcomes measures included the patient's knowledge after the visit, and whether correct treatment was administered.

197

#### 198 <u>Summarizing data elements</u>

199 There was also substantial variation in methods used to create summary quality measures (Appendix 9).

200 One-fifth of articles (n=7, 20%) used principal component analysis (PCA) for quantifying quality; among

201 these, some included only structure constructs in the PCA (n=3), some included structure and process

202	measures ( $n=2$ ), and some used client-reported outcomes only ( $n=2$ ). Four articles calculated means
203	within domains, and used the average of these means as an overall summary measure of quality. All other
204	articles used simple additive indices of constructs (using binary or categorical variables).
205	
206	
207	Discussion
208	Publicly and freely available, SPA program data enable examination of health care quality in low-
209	and middle-income countries, and, through the use of standardized questionnaires, cross-country analyses
210	and comparisons. Accordingly, publications based on analyses of SPA data are increasing dramatically,
211	and nearly half of these papers incorporate more than one SPA dataset.
212	
213	The results of this review indicate opportunities for strengthening the use of SPA data for
214	measuring care quality. Many papers do not use a theoretical framework, despite a rich literature on
215	theories of quality and numerous service-specific frameworks developed by agencies like the World
216	Health Organization. The use of a theoretical framework is advisable from the perspective of research
217	rigor, reproducibility and generalizability; and also since purely empirical approaches for operationalizing
218	care quality (e.g., principal component analysis if it is not informed by an underlying theoretical
219	framework) result in scores that are highly sensitive to the exact method deployed <sup>19</sup> or the health system
220	context <sup>25</sup> , which limit generalizability of the results.
221	
222	We found that certain SPA modules are relatively rarely utilized – particularly service
223	observation and client exit interviews – and as a result, certain quality constructs (especially patient
224	reports of the care experience, which were characterized here as "outcomes") are often omitted from
225	characterizations of care quality. It should be noted that patient satisfaction can be challenging to measure
226	with high validity and reliability <sup>26, 27, 28</sup> , and reported experience may also depend on patients' overall

227	expectation of the health system and care quality <sup>29, 30, 31</sup> . Future quality of care studies – including SPA
228	surveys – should explore ways to improve measurement of client-reported experience.
229	
230	The vast heterogeneity in operationalization limits the development of a larger literature on care
231	quality, since these studies differ in their underlying approach to defining and measuring quality. A multi-
232	dimensional approach to measuring health care quality may be necessary due to the complexity and
233	multifaceted nature of the interaction $^{32}$ – for example, studies have found a low correlation between
234	"quality" when measured as inputs (infrastructure) versus service delivery <sup>33</sup> , as well as a weak
235	association between service quality and patients' satisfaction with care <sup>34</sup> .
236	
237	
238	These results add to a growing literature about opportunities to expand our learning from public
239	goods datasets like SPA. Recent reviews have identified gaps between global standards of care quality,
240	and studies using publicly-available data (including SPA) <sup>17, 18, 35</sup> . Although disagreement and debate
241	about how to define quality is not new, nor unique to SPA data, the use of a common dataset with
242	standardized tools offers a unique opportunity to align definitions and methods. In Table 2, we suggest
243	ways in which care quality can more comprehensively be measured using available SPA data elements,
244	based on gaps identified in this study. First, structural aspects of care quality should include infrastructure
245	relevant to the patient experience <sup>36, 37</sup> . Second, many analyses use the SARA methodology for capturing
246	structure and process; we recommend the development of a new harmonized "SARA+" approach, to
247	represent quality of the components themselves. For example, SARA measures whether essential
248	medicines are available, but a SARA+ metric would include whether these medicines are stored
249	appropriately; SARA includes recent training of personnel, and SARA+ would capture the average
250	availability of these personnel. Third, quality measures using SPA data should strive to include outcomes
251	- whether patient-reported or objectively measured <sup>38</sup> . SPA surveys are a unique source of information
252	from service observations and exit interviews, and therefore include rare information about outcomes

253 related to patient experience, which would enhance our understanding of care quality. We also 254 recommend that future SPA surveys expand the exit interview module, to collect more nuanced and rich data about the care experience; and add more service types to the direct observation modules, beyond the 255 256 maternal and child health care services currently included. There are challenges in designing approaches 257 to measuring and reporting care quality, even with standardized datasets, particularly across countries – 258 certain constructs may only be relevant in certain settings due to disease endemicity, for example. Future 259 efforts to standardize quality measurement using SPA data should consider how to account for such 260 geographic heterogeneity and recommend ways in which multi-country analyses might overcome this challenge. 261

262

Some limitations to these findings should be noted. First, the search was only conducted in 263 264 PubMed so we may have missed papers indexed in other databases. Second, the SPA program is only one source of standardized health service quality data; SPA data were selected for this study do to their 265 266 comprehensiveness and the inclusion of multiple data sources and perspectives (facility, provider, patient), but other datasets, including from the WHO and the World Bank, should also be included for a 267 268 more comprehensive understanding of the state of quality measurement in low- and middle-income 269 countries. Third, the classification of variables into quality constructs was based on our assessment (not 270 necessarily how the authors categorized these) which was a subjective process. We chose to use WHO service guidelines for classifying process measures, but other frameworks might also be informative<sup>39, 40</sup>. 271 272 Fourth, true "outcomes" are also not included in SPA surveys, so this analysis could only include 273 outcomes insofar as they related to patient-reported experience. (SPA surveys would be even more 274 informative and powerful if they included information on true "outcomes" such as morbidity and 275 mortality (whether through the SPA data collection process, or through linkages with health information 276 systems). Lastly, this review did not assess quality of the included studies, nor compare results of these 277 quality assessments.

278

### 279 Conclusion

280 Consistency in quality measurement is critical for cross-country analyses and comparisons. Future studies should seek to refine and harmonize these measures, and to evaluate the advantages and 281 282 disadvantages of methods to summarize across Structure, Process and Outcome domains, including 283 comparing different empirical approaches for summarizing quality of care measures. There may also be important distinctions across service types (e.g. sick child care, antenatal care, childbirth or family 284 planning services), and this area also merits further study. SPA surveys are an essential tool for 285 286 researchers and policymakers, and the public health community should strive to maximize the impact and 287 global learnings from studies that use these data by developing consensus around definitions, frameworks and operationalizations of key variables. 288

Table 2: Suggestions for strengthening and harmonizing measurement of care quality using SPA data

- Incorporate patient-facing elements of infrastructure, e.g. availability of toilet, adequate waiting area, auditory and visual privacy.
- Enhance SARA indicators by adding quality dimensions, e.g. storage quality and organization, capacity to repair equipment, employment quality (opportunities for promotion, job description), hours and days of service/staff availability.
- Include outcomes including patient-reported ("complaint score" of problems during visit, satisfaction with care, would recommend to others) and appropriateness of clinical care.

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