

**Effectiveness of a national quality improvement programme to improve survival after
emergency abdominal surgery:
A stepped-wedge cluster randomised trial with embedded process evaluation and
ethnographic study**

**Carol J. Peden, Tim Stephens, Graham Martin, Brennan C. Kahan, Ann Thomson, Kirsty
Everingham, Mandeep Phull, David Kocman, Jose Lourtie, Sharon Drake, Alan Girling,
Richard Lilford, Kate Rivett, Duncan Wells, Ravi Mahajan, Peter Holt, Fan Yang, Simon
Walker, Gerry Richardson, Sally Kerry, Iain Anderson, Dave Murray, David Cromwell, Mike
P.W. Grocott, Julian Bion and Rupert M. Pearse and the EPOCH trial group***

Prof Carol J. Peden, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, CA 90033,
USA

Mr Tim Stephens, William Harvey Research Institute, Queen Mary University of London, UK
EC1M 6BQ

Prof Graham Martin, Health Sciences, University of Leicester, UK LE1 7RH

Mr Brennan C. Kahan, Pragmatic Clinical Trials Unit, Queen Mary University of London, UK E1
2AB

Ms Ann Thomson, Pragmatic Clinical Trials Unit, Queen Mary University of London, UK E1
2AB

Dr Kirsty Everingham, William Harvey Research Institute, Queen Mary University of London,
UK EC1M 6BQ

Dr David Kocman, Health Sciences, University of Leicester, UK LE1 7RH

Mr Jose Lourtie, Royal College of Anaesthetists, London UK

Ms Sharon Drake, Royal College of Anaesthetists, London UK

Dr Alan Girling, Institute of Applied Health Research, University of Birmingham, UK

Prof Richard Lilford, Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK CV4 7AL

Mrs Kate Rivett (patient representative), London, UK

Mr Duncan Wells (patient representative), Chalfont St. Peter, Buckinghamshire, UK

Prof Ravi Mahajan, Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences, University of Nottingham, UK

Prof Peter Holt, Molecular and Clinical Sciences Research Institute, St George's University of
London, UK

Dr Fan Yang, Centre for Health Economics, University of York, UK YO10 5DD

Mr Simon Walker, Centre for Health Economics, University of York, UK YO10 5DD

Prof Gerry Richardson, Centre for Health Economics, University of York, UK YO10 5DD

Mrs Sally Kerry, Pragmatic Clinical Trials Unit, Queen Mary University of London, UK E1 2AB

Mr Iain Anderson, Salford Royal Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, Manchester, UK

Dr Dave Murray, South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Middlesbrough, UK

Prof David Cromwell, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK WC1H
9SH

Prof Michael Grocott, NIHR Biomedical Research Centre, and Anaesthesia and Critical Care Research Unit, University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust / University of Southampton, UK

Prof Julian Bion, Institute of Clinical Sciences, University of Birmingham, UK B15 2TH

Prof Rupert M. Pearce, William Harvey Research Institute, Queen Mary University of London, UK EC1M 6BQ

***link to study group membership list to be advised**

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Correspondence to:

Rupert M. Pearce
Adult Critical Care Unit
Royal London Hospital
London
E1 1BB
United Kingdom
e-mail: r.pearse@qmul.ac.uk
Tel: +44 20 3594 0351

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Competing interest statement

Rupert Pearce holds research grants, has given lectures and/or performed consultancy work for BBraun, GlaxoSmithkline, Intersurgical and Edwards Lifesciences. Rupert Pearce holds a grant for the submitted work, an NIHR Research Professorship and is an NIHR Health Technology Assessment General Board member. Carol Peden has performed consultancy work for Merck and for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement. Graham Martin reports grants from National Institute for Health Research, personal fees from BMJ Group, and is a member of the HTA National Stakeholder Advisory Group. Mike Grocott is NIHR CRN Specialty Lead for Anaesthesia Perioperative Medicine and Pain; Chair, National Institute of Academic Anaesthesia Board; President, Critical Care Medicine Section, Royal Society of Medicine; Board member of EBPOU UK, EBPOU USA and EBPOU International; Board member of Medinspire Ltd. Dave Murray reports personal fees from National Emergency Laparotomy Audit. David Cromwell reports grants from National Emergency Laparotomy Audit (NELA) and is a member of the NELA project team which provided data and assistance to the project. All other authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

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Scientific summary

Background

Emergency abdominal surgery is associated with poor post-operative outcomes. Around 30,000 patients undergo this type of surgery each year in the UK National Health Service (NHS), with 30-day mortality rates in excess of 10% and wide variation in standards of care between hospitals. Several groups have studied the effect of quality improvement initiatives to implement individual interventions or 'care bundles' of several treatments, and so improve care for these patients. Overall, the findings of these small studies suggest survival benefit, but most

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utilised uncontrolled cohort designs associated with a high risk of bias. The feasibility and benefit of a national quality improvement programme to implement a more extensive acute care pathway for this patient group remain uncertain. We studied the effectiveness of a national quality improvement (QI) programme to implement a care pathway to improve survival for these patients.

Trial intervention

The EPOCH trial care pathway was developed through an evidence-based Delphi consensus process building on previously published guidelines to produce a list of 37 component interventions considered best usual practice for this patient group. We used an evidence-based QI programme to implement this care pathway by changing the practice and culture of patient care. QI leads from surgery, anaesthesia, and critical care were tasked with leading a hospital wide improvement programme to implement the care pathway with the support and guidance of the national EPOCH QI team. The key features of the quality improvement methodology were 1) Reframing the high mortality rates for these patients as a 'social problem' requiring re-organisation of existing care processes rather than technical innovation; 2) Supporting QI leads to engage their frontline staff and executive leaders in the change process; 3) Training local QI leads in basic improvement skills and 4) Supporting teams to analyse and feed back key process measure data to their colleagues to drive change. The EPOCH QI team provided a one-day activation and education meeting for each geographical cluster shortly before or during the first week of activation with further advice and support by phone and email. All QI resources, including data analysis tools, training materials and promotional documents were available online through a Virtual Learning Environment. Follow-up meetings were held 16 weeks after activation so that QI leads and their teams could meet and share experiences. There were also two national meetings to facilitate shared learning during the trial period. QI leads were only eligible to attend these if their hospital had been activated to the trial intervention.

Methods

We studied the effect of the QI programme to implement the EPOCH care pathway in a stepped-wedge cluster randomised trial. This design allowed all participating hospitals to adopt the intervention at some point during the trial, whilst adjusting for the effect of temporal

changes during the trial period. NHS hospitals delivering an emergency general surgical service were eligible for inclusion provided they undertook a significant volume of emergency abdominal surgery cases. Hospitals were required to nominate specialty leads from surgery, anaesthesia and critical care, and to secure support from their NHS Trust Board or equivalent. Hospitals which were already implementing a care pathway to improve treatment for this patient group were excluded. Patients were eligible for inclusion in the data analysis if they were 40 years or older, and undergoing emergency open abdominal surgery in a participating hospital during the 85-week trial period. Patients were excluded from the analysis if they were undergoing a simple appendicectomy, surgery related to organ transplant, gynaecological surgery, laparotomy for traumatic injury, treatment of complications of recent elective surgery or if they had previously been included in the EPOCH trial. Sample size calculations were based on an analysis with fixed time effects and random cluster effects, modified to exclude data collected during the five-week period in which the intervention commenced in individual clusters. Using Hospital Episodes Statistics data, we estimated that 27,540 eligible patients would be registered across 90 NHS hospitals over 85 weeks, with a 90-day mortality rate of 25% in the usual care group, and a between-hospital coefficient of variation of 0.15. Assuming independent hospital effects and a 5% significance level, the trial would have 92% power to detect a reduction in 90-day mortality from 25% to 22%. Hospitals were organised into 15 geographical clusters and commenced the QI programme in random order, based on a computer generated random sequence, over an 85-week period. Trial data were collected through the National Emergency Laparotomy Audit and linked using unique patient identifiers to Hospital Episode Statistics and Office for National Statistics in England and Wales, and the Information Services Division of NHS Scotland. The trial was approved by the East Midlands Research Ethics Committee.

The primary outcome measure was mortality within 90 days of surgery. Secondary outcomes were 180-day mortality, length of hospital stay, and hospital re-admission within 180 days. Analyses were performed on an intention-to-treat basis. The primary outcome was analysed using a mixed-effects parametric survival model, adjusting for time-related effects. In accordance with our analysis plan, we did not test patient-level process measures for statistical significance.

The trial included an ethnographic study of the adoption of the care pathway in six theoretically sampled sites in the UK and a mixed-method process evaluation of the QI programme and all trial sites. The ethnography combined observation of routine practice with interviews with team members in sampled sites to provide a rich qualitative understanding of the delivery of the QI training and the work of clinical leads in seeking to improve care in their hospitals. Data analysis for the ethnographic data was based on the constant comparative method and informed by sensitising concepts from the literature and discussions within the EPOCH team.

For the Process Evaluation we collected a range of quality improvement programme activity data (including data on participation in programme activities such as meetings and use of the trial Virtual Learning Environment) and sent an exit questionnaire to all QI leads. The 37-item, online questionnaire, administered at the end of the trial, was designed to allow description of activities undertaken as well as their overall experience of leading the improvement projects. Only one response was required per hospital but QI leads were asked to complete the questionnaire with colleagues. The programme activity and questionnaire data were analysed and reported using descriptive statistics. Free text data within the exit questionnaire was coded by two investigators using both inductive and deductive content analysis techniques.

For the health economic analysis, data describing survival and in-patient stay after surgery and data on resource use and health related quality of life (measured using the EQ-5D-3L) collected in a sample of eight trial hospitals were employed to estimate costs and quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) of patients receiving the QI intervention and those receiving usual care in the subsample. Within trial analyses were conducted first and then the cost-effectiveness over the lifetime was assessed by employing assumptions of long-term effects. Using regression models developed based on the subsample, costs and effects were estimated for the full trial population and the cost-effectiveness was assessed within the trial period and over the lifetime horizon.

Findings

In total, 15,873 eligible patients underwent surgery in 93 NHS hospitals between 3rd March 2014 and 19th October 2015. Primary outcome data were analysed for 8482 patients in the

usual care group and 7374 in the QI group. There were only modest improvements amongst the ten measures selected to reflect key processes of care within the pathway. In some cases, the baseline rate of adherence to process measures was higher than anticipated. The primary outcome occurred in 1393 patients in the usual care group (16%) compared with 1210 patients in the QI group (16%) (HR QI vs usual care: 1.11 [0.96-1.28]). We found no differences in 180-day mortality or hospital readmission, and a small increase in hospital stay in the QI group (HR for discharge 0.90 [0.83-0.97]). There were only modest overall improvements in processes of patient care following QI implementation.

The process evaluation data confirmed that the QI programme was delivered as intended, with further activities and resources added in response to the needs of teams in individual sites. Attendance at the initial cluster educational meeting was very good, as was use of the online resources, but attendance at the cluster follow-up meetings was lower. The evaluation identified considerable variation in use of the of the hospital level interventions, including differences in which components of the pathway teams attempted to improve and the QI approaches they chose to do this. Reflections from QI leads, captured by the exit questionnaire, suggest that the social aspects of improving care are very important, but time consuming, as are activities related to measurement and data feedback to colleagues.

The ethnographic study revealed near-universal receptivity to the concept of a pathway as a means of improving perioperative processes and outcomes, but concern about the impact on appropriate professional judgement. Teams in the hospitals studied took different approaches to QI, particularly in the extent to which they made use of data, and how they used the PDSA methodology. Some sites were troubled by wider organisational turbulence that made achieving change through EPOCH challenging; leads in other found it difficult to create a 'burning platform' that would prompt behavioural change among their colleagues. In all sites, EPOCH was but one change among many, but there were signs that it could play a significant role in longer-term improvement trajectories.

In the base-case analysis on the sub-sample of patients in the health economics analysis, the QI intervention was associated with higher costs (mean difference £458) but fewer QALYs gained

over the trial period (mean difference -0.002) compared to usual care, thus the QI intervention was dominated. However, over the lifetime horizon, QI intervention was associated with higher costs (mean difference £1508) and more QALYs gained (mean difference 0.131), resulting in an ICER of £11,511/QALY, lower than the recommended threshold. The probabilities of being cost-effective at cost-effectiveness thresholds of £13,000, £20,000 and £30,000 per QALY were 51.8%, 56.3% and 58.7%, respectively, indicating considerable uncertainty. For the whole EPOCH population, QI intervention was associated with higher costs and fewer QALYs over the trial period (i.e. it was dominated). However, over the longer time horizon, QI was associated with higher costs and more lifetime QALYs generating an ICER of £31,632, higher than the highest cost-effectiveness threshold value of £30,000 per QALY. For patients with higher risk for mortality and morbidity before surgery, this intervention was associated with more QALYs and increased costs within trial period and over lifetime horizon. The corresponding ICER was £119,400 per QALY and £3839 per QALY, respectively.

Interpretation

Despite the success of some smaller projects, there was no survival benefit from a national quality improvement programme to implement a care pathway for patients undergoing emergency abdominal surgery. Through a mixed-methods approach, we were able to identify the reasons for the difficulties in changing patient care in individual hospitals. To succeed, large national quality improvement programmes need to allow for differences between hospitals and ensure teams have both the time and resources needed to improve patient care. The intervention was not cost-effective within the trial period. However, the intervention may be cost-effective for the lifetime horizon, particularly for patients at greatest risk of death.