



Lean Enterprise Institute
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On the Mend Q&A

A conversation with John Toussaint, MD, and Roger A. Gerard, PhD, authors of the new book [*On the Mend: Revolutionizing Healthcare to Save Lives and Transform the Industry*](#)

Q: Lean originated in manufacturing; how does it apply to healthcare?

A: Like lean manufacturing, lean healthcare strives to increase value to patients by taking the waste out of processes and improving quality. Nationwide, there is a growing emphasis on continuous quality improvement, cost reduction, and increased patient value — the same type of principles originally applied in manufacturing.

Manufacturers that have diligently and thoroughly applied lean thinking have reaped steady productivity gains while reducing errors and improving the customer and employee experience. Imagine the results that similar improvements could bring in healthcare.

Q: What is lean healthcare?

A: A lean approach to healthcare involves the application of lean thinking to the process of care delivery — whether in hospital rooms, clinics, operating rooms, pharmacies, emergency rooms, or outpatient centers.

It stems from a belief that the solution to delivering better care isn't only about having electronic health records, more insurance coverage, or more advanced technology. Instead, lean healthcare focuses on fundamental improvements that systemically identify and eliminate waste, leading to improved quality, cost, and patient value.

Q: Why is lean healthcare necessary?

A: The quality of U.S. healthcare is uneven at best. Best practices, evidence-based guidelines, and new technologies are not widely and quickly adopted. The current system creates more waste and errors than value.

At the same time, we continue to be plagued by medical errors, and more and more U.S. companies find it hard to compete in a global marketplace due to rising healthcare costs. These issues, combined with specific concerns at individual organizations, create the burning platform that lean leaders can use to push for change. Lean healthcare helps spread the industry's best ideas for creating patient value and accelerating much-needed improvement.

Q: What’s the significance of the book’s title?

A: It’s no secret that U.S. healthcare could be improved. While there’s plenty to be proud of, we continue to make grievous medical errors and create waste that puts patients at risk. Lean healthcare has the potential to revolutionize our system for the better. It is a way to take healthcare away from its current “sick” state and ensure that care delivery is “on the mend.”

Q: What are the attributes of a lean leader?

A: Healthcare won’t change unless people — beginning with industry leaders — start to think differently about their work. Lean leaders need to adopt a philosophy of continuous learning. They must be inquisitive and have a true desire to problem-solve.

The best leaders also act as mentors. They should be patient with colleagues and staff who might be struggling to learn or embrace lean. In order to build momentum for a cultural transformation, lean leaders must be skilled communicators and put themselves in the middle of the action (at the patient bedside) instead of remaining behind their desks.

Q: What are the basic components of the 9-step plan outlined in the book?

A: *On the Mend* proposes 9-steps that will help healthcare organizations begin a lean transformation:

1. Identify the crisis
2. Create a lean promotion office
3. Find change agents
4. Map your value streams
5. Engage senior leaders early in strategy deployment
6. Acquire and disperse knowledge broadly
7. Teach a man to fish (or, become a mentor)
8. Involve suppliers in lean
9. Restructure your organization into product families

Another rule to remember when implementing lean: Don’t let anything stop you. You must continue to move forward, even if you do not yet know the best metrics to portray your success.

Q: What’s next?

A: The goal of *On the Mend* is to introduce the idea of lean healthcare and demonstrate how one particular organization implemented lean principles to achieve success. We are currently planning two additional books that examine healthcare policy and lean tools in further depth. These books will provide detailed guidelines to help individual healthcare organizations begin their own lean journeys.