Quality in healthcare is not luxury

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Across Uganda and East Africa, access to healthcare has improved steadily over the past two decades. More facilities have been built, more professionals trained, and services have expanded closer to communities. But one critical question remains insufficiently addressed: Is the care being delivered consistently safe, effective and trustworthy?

The answer lies not only in expanding access but in strengthening quality management systems across both public and private healthcare.

Quality management is often misunderstood as paperwork or compliance. In reality, it is the backbone of safe and effective healthcare. It is the system that ensures a patient receives the right diagnosis, the correct treatment, proper infection control, clear communication, and appropriate follow-up – every time, regardless of where or by whom they are treated.

The World Health Organisation defines quality healthcare as care that is safe, effective, timely, efficient, equitable, and people-centred. These are not aspirational ideals; they are minimum standards. Without systems to support them, even the most skilled professionals can deliver inconsistent outcomes.

In Uganda, the urgency of quality management is amplified by systemic pressures. High patient volumes, constrained resources, workforce shortages, and a rapidly expanding private sector create conditions where variability in care is inevitable unless deliberately controlled. Too often, errors are only recognised after harm has occurred – whether through infection, misdiagnosis, procedural complications or inadequate follow-up.

In dentistry, for example, failures in sterilisation, radiographic safety, or treatment planning can lead to long-term complications or irreversible damage. In broader medical care, weak quality systems contribute to avoidable maternal deaths, surgical complications, and poor control of chronic diseases.

Quality management addresses these risks proactively. It introduces standardised protocols, ensures traceable documentation, embeds risk-based thinking, and requires continuous monitoring and improvement. It shifts healthcare from being dependent on individual effort to being supported by reliable systems.

This distinction is critical. While important, individual excellence is not sufficient to guarantee patient safety at scale. Systems ensure consistency.

For healthcare professionals, quality management is not a burden – it is protection. It provides clarity in clinical decision-making, supports ethical practice, reduces burnout caused by avoidable errors, and offers legal safeguards through proper documentation and adherence to standards. A well-designed system allows clinicians to focus on what matters most: patient care.

For patients, quality management builds trust. Ugandans and East Africans are increasingly informed and expect transparency, respect and accountability. They want to understand their diagnosis, participate in decisions, and receive care that is predictable and safe. When systems are in place to support these expectations, confidence in healthcare institutions grows.



This trust is particularly important in dentistry, where fear and misinformation often delay care. A quality-driven environment – one that prioritises communication, safety and consistency – encourages patients to seek care earlier, improving long-term health outcomes.

The economic implications are equally significant. Poor-quality care is costly. Managing preventable complications, repeating failed treatments, and addressing litigation consume scarce resources. In contrast, institutions that invest in quality systems experience greater efficiency, fewer adverse events, and stronger reputations. Quality, therefore, is not an expense; it is a cost-saving strategy.

From a policy perspective, the case for quality management is compelling. As Uganda advances towards universal health coverage, expands health insurance frameworks, and strengthens regulation of private providers, quality systems must become central to licensing, accreditation and reimbursement mechanisms.

The Ministry of Health, professional councils and regulatory bodies have an opportunity to move beyond minimum standards towards structured quality assurance frameworks that are measurable and enforceable. This includes promoting clinical audits, standard treatment guidelines, continuous professional development linked to competency, and institutional accountability for outcomes.

At a regional level, East Africa stands to benefit from harmonised quality standards. As cross-border care increases and professional mobility grows, shared benchmarks will be essential in ensuring patient safety and maintaining public confidence. Building quality systems is not a one-time achievement. It requires leadership commitment, cultural change, continuous training, and sustained discipline. It involves reviewing workflows, documenting processes, measuring performance, and improving continuously. It is demanding – but it is achievable.

More importantly, it is transferable. What has been done in one institution can be adapted across clinics, hospitals, and health systems of varying sizes and resources.

The broader lesson is clear: quality must move from being an individual aspiration to a system requirement.

Healthcare is ultimately about human dignity. Every patient – whether in a rural health centre or an urban hospital – deserves care that meets clear, consistent standards. Access without quality is incomplete. It risks eroding trust and undermining the very purpose of healthcare.

For Uganda and East Africa, the next phase of health system strengthening must focus not only on how many people we reach, but on how well we care for them. Quality management is the pathway to that future. It is how we protect patients, support professionals, and build systems that endure. In the end, healthcare systems are not judged by infrastructure alone, but by outcomes, safety and trust. Quality makes all three possible.

The writer is the executive director at Jubilee Dental Ltd, established in 1994. Recently, Jubilee Dental became the first dental provider in Uganda and among the first in the East African region to attain ISO 9001:2015 Quality Management System certification.