Inspections: What's the Beef?

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Recently, I was in a quick-service restaurant and noticed that both the management and the employees were scurrying around cleaning and tidying. They were checking the cleaning chart on the restroom doors, spot checking all the tables and counters, and placing timing numbers in the sandwich bins. Being the naturally curious laboratory professional, I asked the manager why everyone was in a flurry of activity.

The manager explained that a corporate quality manager just arrived at the restaurant to perform a quarterly cleanliness and operations inspection. Just the day before, the county health department had appeared to perform a semi-annual restaurant check. And, she added, a mystery shopper had stopped in for an unannounced quality food and cleanliness check, which occurs twice a month.

The restaurant manager can usually anticipate visits from the county health or corporate quality inspectors, but it’s the visits from the mystery shoppers (who pop in unannounced) that really keep the staff on its toes. A mystery shopper’s identification remains such until the shopper reveals him- or herself by walking up to the counter and delivering a copy of the visit findings.

The manager fervently wished that the restaurant’s owner would make a personal visit to see how well the restaurant was performing. Quality service and attention to detail was apparent in every corner and it showed in the staff’s customer focus and by the satisfied customers filling the dining room.

I calculated the number of external inspections this restaurant would experience in a 12-month period, only to arrive at the amazing sum of 30! All of these inspections are designed to ensure the quality of the food products, the cleanliness of the restaurant, and the restaurant’s adherence to corporate and government quality guidelines and regulations. Most are unannounced. Knowing that the restaurant will be judged on quality more frequently than every-other-week means the staff needs to practice quality as a matter of routine service delivery—not as something “extra” or “different” from the tasks of preparing and serving food. Quality must be built into the task of preparing and serving food.

Laboratory professionals, does this sound familiar? Have we heard these words before? That quality should be integral to your work and not just programs, as are quality control and quality assurance or a biannual cleanup?

Isn’t your laboratory’s quality just as important as—or more important than—that of a restaurant? Yet, laboratory professionals and management often gripe about the much smaller number of assessments or inspections they are subject to every 2 years. Shouldn’t the inspection process be considered a verification stamp of the laboratory’s ongoing quality? Isn’t it a quality tool to help the laboratory identify activities in need of review for efficiency and effectiveness?

Inspections and external assessments are meant to provide laboratory management with a fresh and different perspective on the output of the laboratory’s processes. Assessors or auditors can often provide information and guidance on current or updated regulations, patient-safety goals, and quality philosophies. The results of external assessments can be used to guide the development of internal-assessment activities.

To ensure quality and patient safety, laboratories should welcome inspections and assessments as opportunities to:

- See your laboratory’s performance through an outside objective perspective.
- Use assessors and auditors as quality improvement consultants—you’ve paid for their services, so ask questions and learn!
- Update your knowledge about laboratory regulations, patient safety initiatives, and quality efforts.
- Build confidence that your laboratory provides quality services.
- Remain current in new methods and tools to monitor and assess your laboratory’s internal performance.

Whether it’s a restaurant or a laboratory, it’s all about serving up good products and quality service in a clean environment to keep customers satisfied.

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