A qualitative study of the activities performed by people involved in clinical decision support: recommended practices for success

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Accessibility
A qualitative study of the activities performed by people involved in clinical decision support: recommended practices for success

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ABSTRACT
Objective To describe the activities performed by people involved in clinical decision support (CDS) at leading sites.
Materials and methods We conducted ethnographic observations at seven diverse sites with a history of excellence in CDS using the Rapid Assessment Process and analyzed the data using a series of card sorts, informed by Linstone’s Multiple Perspectives Model.
Results We identified 18 activities and grouped them into four areas. Area 1: Fostering relationships across the organization, with activities (a) training and support, (b) visibility/presence on the floor, (c) liaising between people, (d) administration and leadership, (e) project management, (f) cheerleading/buy-in/sponsorship, (g) preparing for CDS implementation. Area 2: Assembling the system with activities (a) providing technical support, (b) CDS content development, (c) purchasing products from vendors (d) knowledge management, (e) system integration. Area 3: Using CDS to achieve the organization’s goals with activities (a) reporting, (b) requirements-gathering/specifications, (c) monitoring CDS, (d) linking CDS to goals, (e) managing data. Area 4: Participation in external policy and standards activities (this area consists of only a single activity). We also identified a set of recommendations associated with these 18 activities.
Discussion All 18 activities we identified were performed at all sites, although the way they were organized into roles differed substantially. We consider these activities critical to the success of a CDS program. Conclusions A series of activities are performed by sites strong in CDS, and sites adopting CDS should ensure they incorporate these activities into their efforts.

INTRODUCTION
Health information technology (HIT), including electronic health records (EHRs), computerized provider order entry (CPOE) systems, and clinical decision support (CDS) systems, in particular, has been shown to improve healthcare quality, safety, and effectiveness.1–8 Recent federal legislation and regulations have been designed to encourage and guide adoption of HIT.7–9 However, barriers to effective adoption of HIT, and CDS in particular, persist, including dissatisfaction among providers,10 shortages of trained HIT workers,11 high costs,12 and limited research identifying necessary components for successful HIT implementation.2–5,6,13

METHODS
In a previous paper, we described the theoretical underpinnings of our perspective on CDS,19,20 which are informed by Linstone’s Multiple Perspectives Model (figure 1).21 This framework informed subject selection and data analysis for our study. In brief, we incorporated the perspectives of clinical end users, CDS developers, and administrators, each of whom have different meanings for, and perspectives on, the concept of CDS.

This study was conducted using a qualitative dataset collected from 2007 to 2009. Detailed descriptions of our study design, sample selections, and data collection methods have been published elsewhere,18,25 but will be outlined here. The study was approved by institutional review boards (IRBs) at Oregon Health & Sciences University (OHSU), Portland, Oregon, USA; Brigham and Women’s Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, USA; the
The two community hospitals represent different histories of CDS use: one site has operated their system for over 40 years, the other, for 2 years; and they use different commercial systems. The ambulatory sites operate two different commercial systems and three locally developed systems. Each site employs, at minimum, drug-interaction checking, drug-allergy checking, preventive care reminders, order sets, documentation templates, and referential CDS tools. Other than the qualification of being excellent at CDS, the chosen study sites are quite diverse and represent a wide range of healthcare organizations.

Selection of subjects within sites
Following the Multiple Perspectives Model, we interviewed individuals representing a broad spectrum of people at each site performing a variety of roles in CDS development, management, implementation, training, support, and usage. Additional subjects were identified through recommendations by interviewees and local sponsors.

Data collection methods
We adapted the rapid assessment process (RAP) to appropriately and accurately collect data from the study sites. Using a multidisciplinary research team and following the RAP method, we carried out intensive site visits and collected data through interviews, observations, and field surveys in a relatively short period of time. The completion of pre-visit 'site profiles' and system demonstrations allowed us to design interview questions that incorporated the language and philosophy of the individual sites. These data collection methods were designed with the goal of encouraging subjects and field investigators to view the CDS system through three different lenses: technical, organizational, and personal aspects.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the investigators also took detailed field notes. Both the transcripts and the field notes were entered into the NVivo system (Burlington, Massachusetts, USA) for qualitative data analysis.

Data analysis
All interview transcripts and field notes were reviewed and coded by the team of anthropologists. The anthropologists initially used the set of 10 themes from our original paper on CPOE, coding relevant passages of each document according to these 10 themes. Over the course of the coding process, the definitions of the themes were revised, new themes were added, and others were combined or removed in consultation with the entire study team. Once the coding scheme of 10 CDS-related themes was finalized, all documents were reviewed by two team

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**Table 1** Attributes of study sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Providence Portland Medical Center</th>
<th>El Camino Hospital</th>
<th>Partners HealthCare</th>
<th>Wishard Memorial Hospital Clinics</th>
<th>Roudebush Veterans Health Administration</th>
<th>Mid-Valley IPA</th>
<th>RWJ Medical Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Portland, Oregon, USA</td>
<td>Mountain View, California, USA</td>
<td>Boston, Massachusetts, USA</td>
<td>Indianapolis, Indiana, USA</td>
<td>Indianapolis, Indiana, USA</td>
<td>Salem, Oregon, USA</td>
<td>New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of setting</td>
<td>Community hospital</td>
<td>Community hospital</td>
<td>Community hospital</td>
<td>Academic and community outpatient</td>
<td>Academic outpatient clinics</td>
<td>Community outpatient</td>
<td>Academic outpatient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of system</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Locally developed and commercial</td>
<td>Locally developed</td>
<td>Nationally developed</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table has been used with permission from the author.

IPA, Independent Physicians Association; RWJ, Robert Wood Johnson; VA, Veterans Affairs.
members trained in anthropology (AB and JW) and passages were coded with the final coding scheme. The results of this analysis have been reported previously.18

For this manuscript, we conducted a more detailed analysis of all passages that were identified as relating to the ‘people’ theme. We extracted all passages coded with this theme and presented them to a team of six clinical informatics experts. These experts worked in pairs, with each pair analyzing data from two sites and identifying granular activities. The team then conducted a series of pile sorts to identify a set of essential activities. Pile sorting is a standard method for grouping concepts and identifying themes, used in both cognitive research and social science.25 The team took all of the activities identified by the pairs, which had a high degree of overlap and duplication, and iteratively grouped and split them until consensus was achieved. Although pile sorting is inherently subjective, we employed several techniques to ensure rigor. First, we used a multidisciplinary group to do the sorting, ensuring that a variety of perspectives were included. Second, we conducted the sorting over a period of several days, allowing each team member to reflect on the evolving piles and also to discuss their perspectives on opportunities for splitting or grouping activities. Finally, we proceeded until consensus was reached, and all team members were satisfied with the final piles. Although there is no guarantee that a similar team would reach an identical set of piles, we believe our process was quite rigorous and accurately captured the underlying activities. After the pile sort was complete, the activities were then grouped into overarching areas of function.

RESULTS
After the first round of analysis within the people theme, we identified 219 activities described by our informants. After several rounds of pile sorting, a total of 18 activities were identified and are described in this section. To facilitate discussion, we further grouped these 18 activities into four areas of function. In the following section, we describe patterns seen across all the study sites relating to the role of people in CDS. Boxes 1 and 2 give one or two illustrative quotes from our interviews that shed light on each theme, while boxes 3 and 4 present best practices we identified from our site visits.

Fostering relationships across the organization
Training and support
Training and support are necessary to ensure proper implementation and continued use of CDS; and this includes educating staff; training physicians, nurses, and pharmacists; and fixing post-implementation system errors. Although all sites had training and support programs that covered general use of their clinical information systems, the sites also emphasized that it was important to train end users on CDS, and to advise them when a new CDS intervention would be put into place so that they would understand the rationale, significance, and appropriate responses to the intervention.

Visibility/presence on the floor
In parallel with ‘training and support’, the sites also emphasized the importance of having individuals who are knowledgeable about CDS present on clinical units to answer questions, provide support, and gather feedback. Several sites had made improvements to their CDS tools based on this ‘on the floor’ feedback, identifying, for example, clinical situations where an alert fired inappropriately, or a reminder’s wording that clinicians found unclear.

Liasing between people
All the sites identified challenges in communication between clinical users and technical staff, and each had at least one person in a liaison or bridging role who spoke both ‘languages’, generally a clinician cross-trained in informatics or information technology (IT). These individuals were highly valued by their organizations, and both technical and clinical constituencies considered them essential to the success of their CDS programs.

Administration and leadership
In addition to these liaison staff, who often operate at an individual contributor or middle management level, each site emphasized the importance of people in high-level positions who are ‘champions’ for decision support, are knowledgeable about clinical and socio-technical aspects of the system, and oversee quality. Common titles included chief medical officers, chief nursing officers, chief quality officers, and chief executive officers. Although these individuals did not always have technical expertise, their opinion about safety, quality, and clinical issues was highly respected and valued in their organization, so they were effective at communicating the importance of related CDS interventions to end users.

Project management
All sites had project managers who oversaw CDS projects. Generally, a project manager would track a CDS project from request, through implementation. Project managers often interacted with, but were generally distinct from, the ‘liaison staff’ in theme 1c, with the liaison staff focusing on translation and the project managers focusing on coordination.

Cheerleading/buy-in/sponsorship
Because CDS projects often involve a variety of groups in a health system, all sites identified the need to ‘cheerlead’ for CDS projects and get buy-in and sponsorship across the organization. For example, new CDS interventions would often require subject matter expertise from pharmacists, physicians, and nurses while affecting the workflow of one or two of these groups. People involved in CDS would attend meetings, make presentations, cultivate relationships, and even call in favors to align all these groups behind a new CDS initiative.

Preparing for CDS implementation
Each site emphasized the importance of early planning of new CDS interventions, often beginning 6 months to a year before going live. During this planning phase, CDS practitioners worked to gain an understanding of the functionality of the system before implementation, the needs of end users, and the various approaches that might be taken to implement the CDS intervention. Key to this is focusing on user needs and support before and during the early stages of implementation.

Assembling the system
Providing technical support
Fixing technical errors in the system is an ongoing activity for all clinical IT departments; however, our sites reported that it was particularly challenging for CDS. CDS support issues are is often difficult for IT departments and technical help desks to resolve because they often involve nuanced clinical issues. Most sites reported that they quickly route CDS-related concerns to personnel with clinical knowledge, and many users reported ‘back channels’, such as emailing a chief medical information officer directly, when they perceive a problem with a CDS intervention.
CDS content development

One of the most resource-intensive activities reported by our sites was developing CDS content, such as rules, order sets, and templates. Most sites reported purchasing some of their content, with all sites using a commercial drug database and (potentially customized) commercial drug-interaction alerts. Many sites also purchased order sets\(^26\) and some sites purchased documentation tools.
Purchasing products from vendors
Among sites with commercial EHRs, most reported that their selection of an EHR system was the decision that had most impact on CDS. Most sites reported that price, compatibility with existing systems, and end-user feedback on usability and workflow were the main drivers of their system selection, with CDS a consideration, but not the driving factor. After system selection, many sites either worked with their EHR vendor or engaged with clinical content vendors to acquire additional CDS capabilities. Even sites that developed their own system still reported important relationships with vendors, especially for medication-related and referential CDS content. Site leaders all emphasized the importance of maintaining positive relationships with vendors.

Knowledge management
Knowledge management activities were challenging for all sites in our sample, with each site tracking clinical guidelines and evidence, quality measures, and regulatory requirements to identify new areas for CDS or areas where CDS content needed to be updated. Many, but not all, sites had regular processes to review their content, though often only every several years (and some sites had backlogs). Some sites reported substantial knowledge management infrastructure (such as tracking systems, version management tools, and online collaboration environments), while others had no tools, or relied on spreadsheets to track content. We explored this theme in detail (with a different sample) in a previous manuscript.

System integration
Because CDS interventions often depend on data from a variety of sources, CDS practitioners found themselves regularly involved in system integration activities, requiring an understanding of data models, computer interfaces, and controlled clinical vocabularies, as well as the skills to navigate the front and back end of database structures.

Using CDS to achieve the organization’s goals
Reporting
All sites regularly generated clinical performance reports. These reports were used by leaders and healthcare providers to monitor performance and identify areas for improvement. These areas for improvement were often dealt with by new CDS interventions. Most, but not all, sites also used clinical performance reports to assess the effectiveness of CDS interventions.
Box 3  Themes, activities, and recommended practices for theme areas 1 and 2

1. Fostering relationships across the organization
   a) Training and support:
      ▶ When a new CDS intervention is created, develop a training curriculum and communication package for the intervention. This package can range from a paragraph-long email to a half-day course, depending on the complexity of the intervention.
      ▶ Provide training and communication to staff before and after bringing a new CDS intervention live—don’t just silently turn on an intervention and hope it will work.
      ▶ Deal with post-implementation problems with CDS quickly. Problems with new CDS interventions are common, so it is essential to rapidly identify and correct these errors, and communicate these fixes to clinicians. Clinicians are impressively forgiving if they understand why an error occurred and can see that it was taken seriously and fixed quickly, and that steps were taken to prevent recurrence.
   b) Visibility/presence on the floor:
      ▶ Place knowledgeable experts on the floor when a new CDS intervention is deployed to answer questions, train users, and gather feedback. It is often helpful to make these users visible by giving them a special vest, hat, button, or shirt.
      ▶ Have information technology and quality leaders make regular “walk rounds” to build relationships with end users and hear their concerns and suggestions. Make sure to act on these suggestions, and provide follow-up to those who made the suggestions.
   c) Liaising between people:
      ▶ Develop staff who can speak both clinical and technical language and act as a liaison between these two groups. Some of the best liaisons we encountered were clinicians with informatics training who understood the realities of the clinical and technical worlds.
      ▶ These liaison staff should focus much of their effort on building relationships in the organization, and are ideal to provide visibility and presence on the floor.
   d) Administration and leadership:
      ▶ Involve senior clinical leaders in the development of your CDS strategy. These leaders should ensure that CDS is aligned with broader organizational goals and objectives, and also identify opportunities to use CDS in service of broader organizational purposes.
      ▶ When possible, have these leaders send communications about new CDS to show the importance of these new interventions to the clinical goals of the organization.
   e) Project management:
      ▶ Each new CDS initiative should have a project manager assigned to track its goals and drive it to completion.
      ▶ The project manager should work with the liaison staff from theme 1.c to convene both clinical and technical experts for the project.
   f) Cheerleading/buy-in/sponsorship:
      ▶ Foster enthusiasm for new CDS interventions among users and leaders through regular, concise, to-the-point communications.
      ▶ When possible, find ways to involve users before implementation of new CDS, for example, as beta testers and usability study subjects.
   g) Preparing for CDS implementation:
      ▶ Before any implementation, assess the current state of the EHR and clinical process, and then deliberately map out changes that are needed with input from end users.
      ▶ Test new CDS interventions extensively before going live.
      ▶ Focus on user needs and on-site support in the period immediately after going live.

2. Assembling the system
   a) Providing technical support:
      ▶ Train technical personnel to quickly escalate CDS issues requiring clinical evaluation and input.
      ▶ Permit the use of back channels, such as emailing the chief medical information officer, so that users feel that they have a place to turn when they have a problem with CDS. But make sure to track such communications carefully and refer users back to traditional channels, such as a help desk, when their problem is more appropriately handled there.
      ▶ Quickly correct problems with CDS content that affect patient care.
   b) CDS content development:
      ▶ Ensure that content which is developed is consistent with guidelines, evidence, and best practices, and also that it matches your organization’s goals and procedures.
      ▶ Develop a process for prioritizing development of new content, both to ensure that limited resources are effectively deployed and also to avoid building content that is likely to be bothersome or unlikely to be used.
      ▶ Consider purchasing content that you can’t develop or maintain effectively in-house.
   c) Purchasing products from vendors:
      ▶ Develop strong working relationships with vendors who have an impact on CDS, particularly your EHR vendor and any clinical content vendors you use. These relationships are strategically important and shouldn’t just be driven by price.
      ▶ Be the voice of your users—take their feedback to your vendor and communicate the vendor’s response back to the users. Even if a problem can’t be resolved immediately, communication helps.
   d) Knowledge management:
      ▶ Create an inventory of all CDS content in your organization, and a process for maintaining it regularly and in response to changes in guidelines or evidence.
      ▶ If you have a sufficiently large body of CDS content, consider investing in tools for managing it beyond just a spreadsheet.
   e) System integration:
      ▶ Where possible, work to create a seamless flow of information into your CDS systems.
      ▶ Never ask a user to re-enter information needed for CDS that is already (or should be) known to an electronic system. CDS, clinical decision support; EHR, electronic health record.
Box 4  Themes, activities, and recommended practices for theme areas 3 and 4

3. Using CDS to achieve the organization’s goals
   a) Reporting:
      ▶ Develop a comprehensive strategy for quality measurement and reporting, and use these measures and reports to identify
         opportunities for new or improved CDS.
      ▶ Where needed, augment structured data in the EHR with manual abstraction to identify key clinical events and improve the accuracy
         of measures.
   b) Requirements-gathering/specifications:
      ▶ Begin all CDS requirements-gathering exercises with a series of conversations from all end users who will be affected by the CDS
         change. Give their input extra weight.
      ▶ Appreciate that most CDS development is highly iterative, so consider any specifications to be evolving and pivot as needed.
   c) Monitoring CDS:
      ▶ Develop metrics and reports about how well CDS is functioning, and monitor them both immediately after going live and on an
         ongoing basis. Consider implementing a proactive notification system to alert you if a CDS intervention exhibits anomalous
         performance (eg, significantly increased or decreased firing rate) so that you can investigate.
      ▶ Consider reporting CDS-related metrics to clinical committees and your organization’s board to help them understand how CDS fits
         into the organization’s broader quality and safety agenda.
   d) Linking CDS to goals:
      ▶ Consider CDS a key tool for achieving organizational quality, safety, and cost goals and use it smartly to drive change.
      ▶ Conversely, remember that CDS is only one tool in your toolbox—also consider quality reports, registries, care management
         programs, training, forcing functions, and other potential tools.
      ▶ Foster communication between quality and informatics professionals in your organization.
   e) Managing data:
      ▶ Track and, where possible, integrate data across sources in your organization to build a complete picture of your CDS program’s
         performance.
      ▶ If your organization has multiple sites (or is part of a consortium) consider benchmarking your CDS activities between sites to identify
         best practices and areas for improvement.

4. Participation in external policy and standards activities
   ▶ Carefully monitor external regulatory programs and policies, as well as the development of technical and clinical standards. Enlist the
     help of your vendors and professional associations in monitoring these activities.
   ▶ Consider adding your voice to discussions on these activities—new policies and standards are sometimes developed without
     significant input from “on-the-ground” users, and clinical perspectives generally carry significant weight.

CDS, clinical decision support; EHR, electronic health record.

Requirements-gathering/specifications
CDS practitioners (often the liaison staff from theme 1.c) defined requirements for new CDS interventions (often based on
the results of reporting) and then developed specifications that were used to implement CDS. The specifications differed in
their level of formality—most were short written documents, but some were formal documents including detailed logic speci-
fications. All sites reported that they generally went through several iterations of development on a new CDS intervention
before deployment.

Monitoring CDS
In addition to the clinical reports described in theme 3.a, each site had at least rudimentary ability to monitor their CDS by
generating reports—for example, of firing and acceptance rates for alerts or usage of order sets. Most of the sites, however,
reported monitoring such reports only on an ad hoc basis, generally right after implementation of a new CDS intervention or
in response to user complaints.

Linking CDS to goals
All sites reported that they used CDS as a key tool in their arsenal for achieving their organizational quality, safety and cost
goals. Thus, they all worked to ensure alignment between their CDS interventions, their organization’s strategic goals and other
quality improvement activities, including training and quality measurement.

Managing data
CDS practitioners all reported the importance of managing large amounts of data, including underlying EHR data, data on
performance of CDS, and external data, including error reports, cost data, and clinical data from external sources.

Participation in external policy and standards activities
The final theme we identified was a singleton: participation in external policy (eg, meaningful-use or policy advisory committees)
and standards (eg, HL7) activities. All sites reported at least passive involvement, such as participation in webinars or ensuring their
organization was on track to meet meaningful-use targets. However, some informants participated more actively by sitting on
committees, providing input to standards, or conducting grant-funded research. These activities united the individual (and
sometimes solitary) activities performed at each site, creating a sense of community and common purpose for CDS practitioners.

DISCUSSION
A key finding of our work is that each of the 18 categories of activities we identified was performed at every site we visited,
although the extent to which they were performed varied

Implementing and maintaining successful CDS programs require many different kinds of skills and activities. This study identified 18 types of activity carried out by different people in a sample of robust CDS programs. Healthcare providers and provider organizations that intend to develop or improve an existing CDS program should ensure that these activities and practices are used. Although employing CDS is challenging, it is also essential if we are to realize the full benefits of the EHRs that we are implementing.

Correction notice This article has been corrected since it was published Online First. The article has been made unlocked.

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Competing interests None.

Ethics approval Oregon Health & Sciences University (OHSU), Portland Oregon, USA; Brigham and Women’s Hospital, Boston Massachusetts, USA; the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, Texas, USA; Providence Portland Medical Center, Portland, Oregon, USA; El Camino Hospital, Mountain View, California, USA; Wishard Memorial Hospital/Regensnief Institute, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA; Roudebush Veterans Affairs Hospital, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA; and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA. The Mid-Valley Independent Physicians Association did not have an institutional review board (IRB), so they relied on the OHSU IRB.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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