NATIONAL QUALITY FORUM
Driving measurable health improvements together

Meeting Summary

Scientific Methods Panel April 2022 Advisory Web Meeting

The National Quality Forum (NQF) convened the Scientific Methods Panel (SMP) for a web meeting on April 27, 2022, to discuss and evaluate ways in which changes to the SMP's review process can improve the Consensus Development Process (CDP).

Welcome, Roll Call, and Review of Meeting Objectives

Dr. Matthew Pickering, NQF senior director, welcomed the SMP and participants to the web meeting. Dr. Pickering, NQF Chief Scientific Officer Dr. Elizabeth Drye, and SMP Co-Chairs Drs. David Nerenz and Christie Teigland provided opening remarks and reviewed the following meeting objectives: (1) review and consider stakeholder feedback to date for continuous improvement to the CDP, (2) describe NQF's aims for improving the CDP, and (3) consider ways in which changes to the SMP's review process can improve the CDP.

Continuous Improvement: Consideration and Discussion of Potential Improvements to the CDP

Various stakeholders, including measure developers and stewards, members of NQF-convened bodies, and NQF staff, have previously provided feedback on the CDP, with specific regard to the SMP. The feedback was gathered over the course of advisory meetings, measure evaluation meetings, via email, and other channels. Both developers and stewards have said that the CDP is resource-intensive, and at times, unpredictable. Developers have also stated that there is not always enough time following the SMP's review to incorporate feedback from the SMP into their full measure submission(s); they also expressed a desire for technical assistance from the SMP. Other stakeholders have noted inconsistencies within the SMP and between the SMP and topic area Standing Committees. The SMP has also made suggestions and asked for changes to the process, such as having NQF staff conduct a more detailed review of the technical requirements before coming to the SMP for evaluation. Furthermore, SMP members have suggested that the SMP should assess measures as either meeting scientific acceptability standards or not, rather than using the High, Moderate, Low, or Insufficient scale that is currently in place. Lastly, SMP members have communicated that their review burden is too high, as they often have a short timeline to review multiple complex measures.

In considering this stakeholder feedback and the opportunities for improving the CDP, including the SMP's role, NQF staff identified five aims to align efforts for CDP redesign. The aims are as follows:

1. Strengthen consistency and scientific oversight
2. Lower the burden for developers through a possible shortened cycle and/or technical assistance
3. Increase overall efficiencies
4. Enhance the experience for and decrease the burden on our volunteer Committee members
5. Address staff pain points (such as high document production burden)

Dr. Pickering presented three examples of changes that were created by NQF with the intention of addressing most, if not all, of these aims. Dr. Pickering noted that NQF is seeking feedback on these examples from the SMP.

Example One: Standing Committee Reviews Relevance/Importance of the Measure First (e.g., the conceptual model)

In this example, after the Intent to Submit (ITS) deadline has passed, the Standing Committee would review the relevance and importance of all measures prior to the SMP's review of the scientific acceptability of complex measures. This example would likely fulfill three of the five CDP redesign aims:

(1) Strengthening consistency because clarity would be provided on a measure's importance and clinical relevance for validity
(3) Increasing efficiency of the process by preventing the SMP from reviewing measures that would ultimately fail the Standing Committee's review on importance or other criteria
(4) Enhancing the volunteer experience by reducing the number of measures that the SMP would need to review during a cycle

An SMP member noted that to ensure that this proposed process is successful, NQF's CDP Standing Committee orientations would need to be enhanced by adding training specifically on the scientific acceptability criteria. Additionally, the SMP questioned how much this process would reduce workload. The SMP members specifically requested data on the number of measures that pass the SMP's review but then do not pass the Standing Committee's evaluation due to the importance to measure and report criteria (i.e., evidence and performance gap).

Several SMP members noted possible adaptations of this process. One member suggested that the Standing Committee members should first review the measure developer's conceptual model for validity testing and risk adjustment. Then, the SMP would determine whether the conceptual model presented was methodologically sound. This would be particularly useful, as currently, the SMP has difficulty with drawing the line between methodological issues and topic area issues when evaluating the appropriateness of the inclusion or exclusion of certain factors for risk adjustment because the two types of issues often overlap. Another SMP member suggested that NQF would improve submissions and provide developers technical assistance by leveraging a peer review process. If Standing Committee members conduct an evaluation of the measure's relevance and importance and then provide feedback, measure developers may be able to improve their submission prior to the full submission deadline. The SMP did note, however, that this process could increase inconsistency if not carefully executed.

Another SMP member expressed that if this change were to be made, then NQF should reconsider what information is due at the ITS deadline. SMP members suggested that developers should submit their evidence, importance, and conceptual model at the ITS deadline, and then once it is passed at this preliminary stage by the Standing Committee, they should submit their scientific acceptability information. The SMP noted that this would reduce the burden on the developers, considering the scientific acceptability of the measure is often the heaviest lift in the submission.

While the SMP did present options for how it could see this solution being successful, it also expressed some concerns, most notably that this solution has been tried before and was not helpful. Additionally, the SMP noted that this solution does add another meeting to the process, which adds burden on the developer.

Example Two: SMP Members Participate in Standing Committee Measure Evaluations

In this example, SMP members would be seated on topic area Standing Committees and participate in topic area measure evaluation meetings. Each Standing Committee member and assigned SMP member(s) would conduct an in-depth evaluation of all criteria for all measures under review. Then the entire Standing Committee, including the assigned SMP member(s), would discuss and vote on each measure against all NQF criteria. NQF staff presented this example as fulfilling all five of the CDP redesign aims. In this example, SMP members would still meet regularly as a full Committee to advise NQF on emerging measurement science and recommendations for criteria updates.

SMP members were generally not in favor of this proposal. Multiple individuals noted that this may be a step backwards and would eliminate significant benefits of the SMP that have become clear since it was established. Namely, many SMP members disagreed that this example would strengthen consistency and scientific oversight because it would remove an opportunity for all complex measures to be reviewed consistently by the same group. The SMP as a whole would no longer make recommendations on the endorsement of a measure. Furthermore, SMP members would need to learn from other Standing Committee members the content needed to prepare them to vote on other criteria (i.e., evidence, performance gap, feasibility, use, and usability). Other members pointed out that the group benefits from discussing complex measures with one another, and this would be lost if this change were to be made. Additionally, Standing Committees currently benefit from eight or nine SMP members reviewing a measure and providing comments. This proposal would limit opportunities for feedback and narrow the discussion, which is not ideal. As SMP members step down and new members join, they would not have that experience of learning from others within the context of measure evaluation. Lastly, SMP members also noted that their purpose is to screen measures that are not scientifically acceptable to prevent these measures from reaching the Standing Committees. In this example, the Standing Committee would have to discuss *all* measures, thus increasing the Standing Committee's workload.

Benefits of this example include Standing Committee members potentially having an improved volunteer experience by being exposed to the SMP's discussions more than they are now (i.e., the fourth aim). This would help facilitate conversations about measures in non-SMP meetings. One member suggested that SMP members should meet as they do now to discuss all measures; they noted that SMP members could also be available to discuss complex measures with the Standing Committees. Even if this example is not implemented, this benefit could be integrated into other examples. However, SMP members noted that this would be more burdensome for SMP members.

Example Three: SMP Advises on Standards and Individual Measures

In this example, the SMP would advise on standards and on a subset of the individual measures it currently reviews. Specifically, the SMP would evaluate complex measures in an advisory, non-voting capacity for the scientific acceptability criteria; advise developers on changes needed; and continue to advise NQF on methodological issues, standards, and emerging measurement science. NQF staff noted this example would fulfil all five of the CDP redesign aims.

The SMP asked NQF to further clarify what advice to the Standing Committees would look like in this context. An SMP member stated that at the inception of the SMP, the goal was to reduce the volume of discussions needed by Standing Committees. The SMP questioned how it will communicate its concerns regarding a measure's scientific acceptability if a vote does not take place. The same SMP member further stated that without even an advisory vote, the Standing Committee will not know how strong the SMP's concerns about the measure are or even whether a lack of consensus exists among the SMP members. The SMP member concluded that if the SMP is to remain of value to the Standing Committees, voting should occur. While some SMP members agreed that a vote was important, others

noted that voting does not capture recommendations for the developers or the Standing Committee. Rather, the conversation elucidates the recommendation.

Another SMP member noted that measures that do not meet the criteria that the SMP has been trying to establish would move forward, and the SMP would not be able to properly communicate concerns to the Standing Committee.

One SMP member suggested combining the first and third examples. As the SMP exists currently, the members do provide advisory feedback to the developers. Therefore, adding some SMP members into the Standing Committee's initial review would provide developers robust advice on the measure from the start. The same SMP member also noted that the ITS form could be shortened to include only relevance, measure definition, suggested data collection approach, and information about the approach to analyzing the data. Other SMP members offered slightly different variations of combining the first and third examples. Specifically, the SMP could advise on the degree to which a model was supported by data, and the Standing Committee would conduct the conceptual review.

Some SMP members urged NQF staff to provide more data informing the changes under discussion, including describing the decisions made by the SMP that the Standing Committee has overturned. Some SMP members stated that because the Standing Committee can overturn the SMP's decision, the SMP is already functioning in an advisory capacity. SMP members further encouraged NQF to consider that multiple Committees are deciding on whether measures meet the same criteria (e.g., The SMP and the Standing Committee both vote on reliability and validity). It is inevitable that there will be disagreement, and therefore, inconsistency. To prevent inconsistency, an SMP member suggested that the CDP could improve if either the SMP or the Standing Committee makes a final decision rather than the Standing Committee having an opportunity to re-vote on the SMP's recommendations, which is the current process.

Additionally, the SMP asked NQF staff to clarify in each scenario whom the SMP would be advising, noting that during the meeting, three possibilities arose: (1) the Standing Committee, (2) NQF, and (3) the developers. Some SMP members counseled against the SMP advising measure developers. If they were to provide advice to the measure developers, a clear line would need to exist so that NQF would not be perceived as a co-developer of the measures.

The SMP also noted the third example could move the SMP and NQF towards a community standard of measurement by increasing the SMP's focus on NQF's endorsement policies and standards. This could result in the SMP having a broader positive impact.

Public Comment

No public or NQF member comments were provided during the web meeting.

Next Steps

Hannah Ingber, NQF manager, reviewed next steps. Ms. Ingber reminded the SMP that NQF staff would create a meeting summary for this meeting. NQF staff will also draft the SMP's process changes for the SMP and broader stakeholder review in the coming weeks.