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## The Joint Commission Journal on Quality Improvement

Volume 28, Issue 9, September 2002, Pages 472-493

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# Microsystems in Health Care: Part 1. Learning from High-Performing Front-Line Clinical Units

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[https://doi.org/10.1016/S1070-3241\(02\)28051-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1070-3241(02)28051-7)

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### Article-at-a-Glance

#### Background

Clinical microsystems are the small, functional, front-line units that provide most health care to most people. They are the essential building blocks of larger organizations and of the health system. They are the place where patients and providers meet. The quality and value of care produced by a large health system can be no better than the services generated by the small systems of which it is composed.

#### Methods

A wide net was cast to identify and study a sampling of the best-quality, best-value small clinical units in North America. Twenty microsystems, representing different component parts of the health system, were examined from December 2000 through June 2001,

using qualitative methods supplemented by medical record and finance reviews.

## Results

The study of the 20 high-performing sites generated many best practice ideas (processes and methods) that microsystems use to accomplish their goals. Nine success characteristics were related to high performance: leadership, culture, macro-organizational support of microsystems, patient focus, staff focus, interdependence of care team, information and information technology, process improvement, and performance patterns. These success factors were interrelated and together contributed to the microsystem's ability to provide superior, cost-effective care and at the same time create a positive and attractive working environment.

## Conclusions

A seamless, patient-centered, high-quality, safe, and efficient health system cannot be realized without the transformation of the essential building blocks that combine to form the care continuum.



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