

HEALTH CARE

By Mike Rona and Dr. Gary Kaplan

Delivering a Better Model

A car company may sound like an odd place to seek a more efficient medical management system – until you look under the hood.

WHEN it comes to health care today, there are some clear choices for leaders in the field. One of the biggest is whether to continue with a management system that is considered by many to be broken or to look for a new path.

It was with this in mind that executives at Virginia Mason Medical Center (VM) began, in 2000, looking for a new, rigorous, zero-defect-based management method. To effect change, this method needed to help transform health care and to focus on quality and safety as the highest priorities.

TOYOTA LEADS THE WAY

We recognized the potential in going outside our industry for a management method that shares the same foundational values of VM – namely, an unyielding commitment to quality and safety, a relentless focus on the customer and a total commitment to staff.

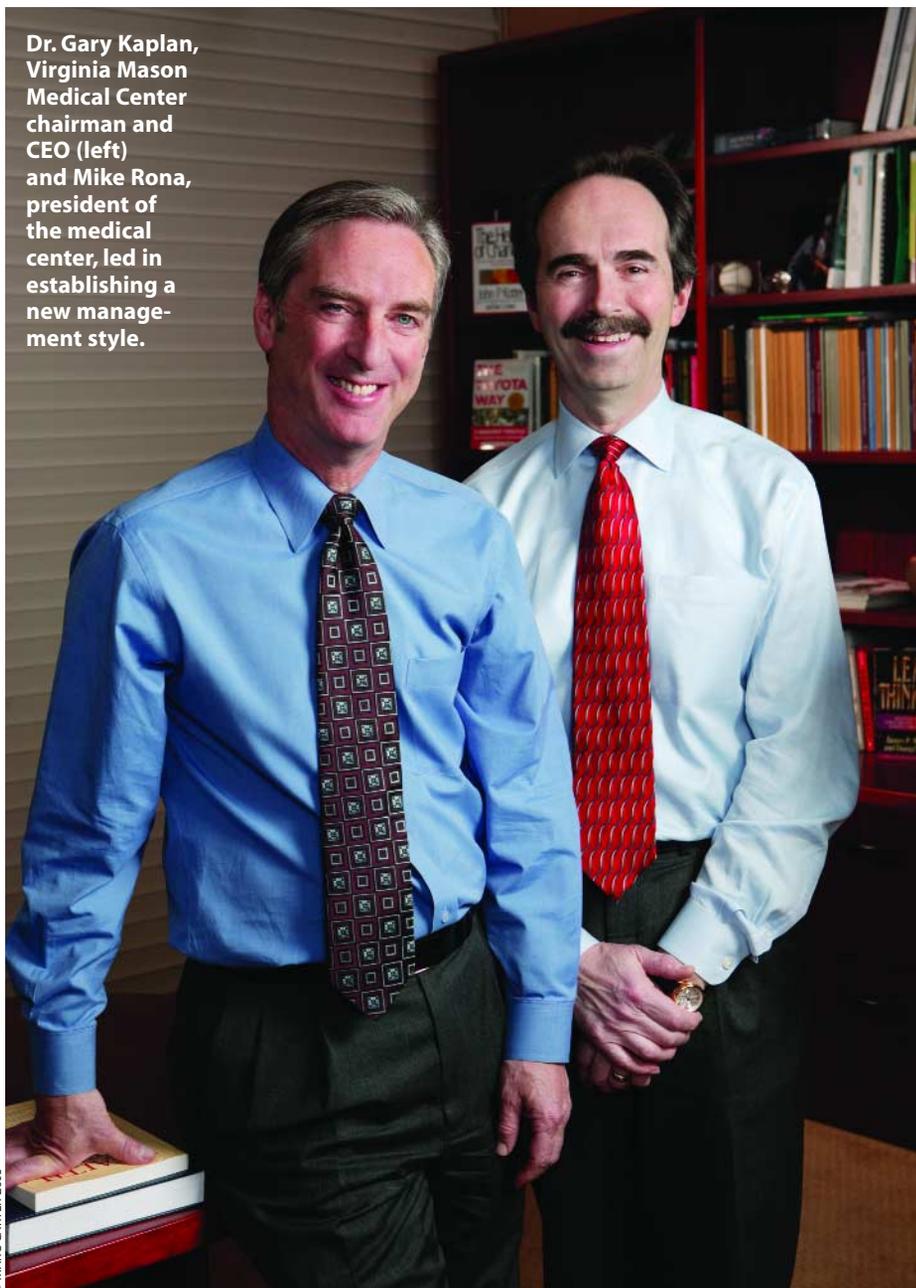
Many health-care organizations had pieces of the puzzle in place, as did VM. None had the complete picture. We found our model in a most unlikely place – Toyota Motor Corp.'s Toyota Production System (TPS).

Certainly, Toyota wouldn't be the first company one would think of when it comes to managing a medical system. But with more than 50 years of history with the method it developed, Toyota has a very rigorous system that focuses on elimination of waste, eradication of mistakes, and continual improvement of its product, all the things that are key to running a high-quality health care system.

In looking at all the processes that surround the delivery of patient care in the hospital and ambulatory practice, we were convinced that the tools of TPS could be applied to health care.

Seeing exactly how Toyota had achieved superior safety results was the first step. VM sent a group of executive leaders to Japan in 2002. The group saw, in action, the most highly evolved form of "lean production" in the world. Watching the manufacture of cars using TPS was an eye-opening experience.

Dr. Gary Kaplan, Virginia Mason Medical Center chairman and CEO (left) and Mike Rona, president of the medical center, led in establishing a new management style.





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The defect-free results they achieved were impressive.

So impressive, in fact, that, upon return from Japan, VM adopted the Virginia Mason Production System (VMPS), named after TPS, with great hope of accelerating quality improvements that would improve care for patients.

ADOPTING A NEW “PRODUCTION SYSTEM”

VMPS is now the management method Virginia Mason uses to make real and measurable improvements in safety, quality and service. VMPS is used to identify and eliminate waste and inefficiency in the numerous processes that are part of a health-care experience. By streamlining the repetitive and low-touch aspects of care delivery, staff are freed to spend more time talking with and listening to patients.

Such a major organizational approach to running a health-care organization must have the total support of those who lead the institution and, ultimately, the entire organization. The importance of teamwork to make improvements is critical, as is the adoption of a new mindset about what is possible.

It first required a new vision, along with a strong commitment. Several ideas emerged that formed the foundation for this new vision. VM's idea to be the quality leader in health care was already in

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place before the company began to investigate the VMPS process. The vision includes:

- An unwavering commitment to the external customer
- An unyielding commitment to safety
- The importance of making visible VM's errors and successes
- The total engagement and empowerment of staff through training and respect
- The importance of creating a culture of improvement for all staff and of acting quickly on suggestions for improvements.

Once the organization committed to a defect-free system for patients and staff, we had to provide the path and tools to ensure success.

Toyota helped us to see what is possible, and provided a template for ways to deploy this method system-wide. Since embarking on this new path in 2002, VM has

achieved several milestones, including:

- Establishing the Kaizen Promotion Office, which signifies the organization's commitment to kaizen – continuous incremental improvement. The office is dedicated entirely to the application of our management methodology.
- Establishing structures that will support VMPS, including rapid process improvement workshops (RPIW), designed to examine and improve every aspect of a work process. VM has conducted several hundred of these RPIWs to date.
- Design and implementation of the VMPS Mastery Track, a program created to train team leaders. All managers and section heads will begin the program by the end of 2005.

SIGNS OF PROGRESS

VM is seeing signs that this method is working.

Lessons learned in the RPIWs are improving outcomes. Examples include:

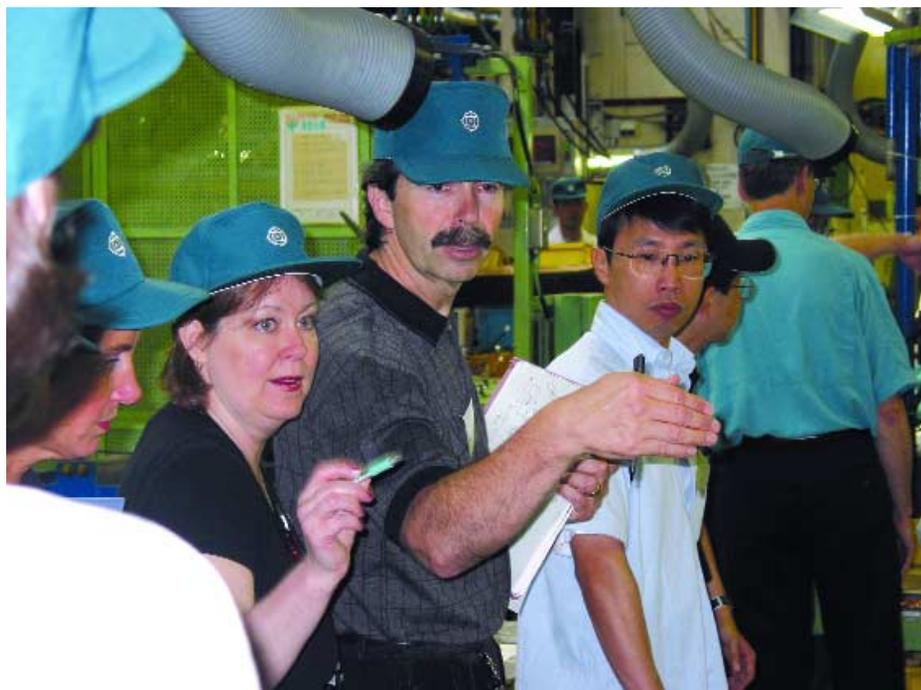
- A reduction in wait times and delays for delivery of services and care to patients by 67 percent resulted in a savings of 363,965 minutes.
- A reduction in staff walking distance – from 387,226 feet to 270,289 feet in 2003 – ultimately resulted in more value-added time, including time available to spend with patients.

Defect-free health care is possible, just as it is in other industries. But this belief depends on leadership and a willingness to change methods. By adopting a new management approach, VM's quality has improved due to reliable processes that deliver defect-free outputs and, ultimately, improved patient (customer) satisfaction.

Although VM is an early adopter of this method for health care, other health-care organizations across the country have begun or are investigating this approach. In other industries, such as the airplane industry, companies like The Boeing Co. have long adopted and effectively used this management method.

For the health-care industry to survive and thrive, change must be embraced. Leaders must step forward and employ new management methods to improve. At Virginia Mason, we've found TPS to be a promising new direction for health care.

Mike Rona is president of Virginia Mason Medical Center. Dr. Gary Kaplan is chairman and CEO of Virginia Mason Medical Center.



Virginia Mason Medical Center found its VMPS management model in an unlikely place – during a visit to Toyota Motor Corp. in Japan in 2002.



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