

Benefits of a Gemba Walk

The **Gemba walk** is a valuable tool within Lean quality improvement methodology that can be applied to neonatal care, though published evidence specifically linking Gemba walks to neonatal outcomes is limited. Its primary value lies in **direct observation of frontline care processes** to identify waste, inefficiencies, and safety hazards that may not be apparent from data review alone.[\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)

What Is a Gemba Walk?

"Gemba" is a Japanese term meaning "the actual place" where work is done. In the Lean framework, a Gemba walk involves leaders and QI teams physically going to the clinical environment to observe the **3 Actuals: actual people, actual place, and actual process**.[\[1\]](#) The goal is to develop a deep understanding of the current state before suggesting changes, measuring cycle times, identifying non-value-added steps, and engaging frontline staff in problem-solving.[\[1\]](#) In healthcare QI frameworks, visible leadership at the point of care — a core principle of the Gemba walk — is a common feature of successful quality improvement programs.[\[3\]](#)

Application in Neonatal Care

While there is limited published literature specifically evaluating Gemba walks in the NICU, the methodology aligns well with several key aspects of neonatal QI:

- **Process observation for safety events:** The AAP Standards for Levels of Neonatal Care emphasize structured approaches to QI, including identification and review of safety events, multidisciplinary involvement, and use of structured improvement frameworks. Gemba walks can serve as the observational foundation for these activities.[\[4\]](#)
- **Identifying workflow inefficiencies:** In an ICU example, a Gemba walk identified duplicated equipment and unnecessary transport time, leading to a streamlined value stream map. Similar applications in the NICU could target processes such as admission, medication preparation, or central line care.[\[1\]](#)
- **Complementing data-driven QI:** The Pediatrix 100,000 Babies Campaign, achieved reductions in mortality, necrotizing enterocolitis, retinopathy of prematurity, and catheter-associated infections through multifaceted QI approaches that combined measurement with process redesign. Gemba walks can inform the "current state analysis" that precedes such interventions.[\[5\]](#)
- **Building a culture of safety:** Creating a highly reliable NICU requires involvement of all organizational levels and an interdisciplinary approach, with adverse events often resulting from suboptimal communication and lack of a shared mental model. Gemba walks promote leadership visibility and frontline engagement, both critical to safety culture.[\[6\]](#)

Practical Considerations for NICU Implementation - A structured NICU Gemba walk program might target high-priority processes such as:

- Delivery room readiness and neonatal resuscitation workflows[\[10\]](#) [\[7\]](#)
- Admission temperature management including incubator top down
- Central line insertion and maintenance bundles

- Medication preparation and administration
- Breast milk handling and human milk feeding processes

The key to success is integrating Gemba observations into a broader QI infrastructure that includes actionable data dashboards, multidisciplinary QI teams, and structured improvement methods such as PDSA cycles. [8][9] Successful NICU QI programs have demonstrated that this type of infrastructure can yield measurable improvements — for example, reducing CLABSI and decreasing the proportion of VLBW infants discharged below the 10th percentile for weight. [8]

References

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