

# Why Dr. Nathan Doesn't Like Letting Patients Wait

Changing rigid structures—that is no easy task especially in the traditional organization of hospitals. But that doesn't stop Dr. Michel Nathan, director of the Centre Hospitalier Emile Mayrisch in Luxembourg. From his perspective, reorienting processes can only bring benefits to both physicians and patients.

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Just four years have passed since the days when Dr. Michel Nathan still felt like a lonely voice in the wilderness. “People were rather amused by my point of view,” he comments. At the time, the well-traveled urologist was lecturing in Paris. His topic was the mental attitude and high standards of quality seen in the Japanese automobile industry, and what even hospitals might learn from them. “That was before I'd heard of Porsche Consulting,” says Dr. Nathan.

Things are different now. Over the course of an eight-week project, the Porsche consultants optimized the processes at the Luxembourg clinical center. This was one of the consultants' first

foreign projects in the healthcare sector. “And not only that, it was a project in a healthcare system which does not currently reward greater efficiency,” says project manager Klaus-Dieter Pannes. In contrast to German hospitals, which struggle with lump compensations, in Luxembourg a payment is made for nearly every service provided. In Luxembourg's healthcare system, physicians only have exclusive contracts with hospitals; in other words, they are not directly employed by the hospital. In consequence, Luxembourg's healthcare system is becoming more expensive each year—in the inpatient sector alone, from 2003 to 2005, healthcare expenditures rose by 29 percent. In Dr. Nathan's view, the system is becoming too costly, and he speculated that the end would

be coming all too soon. But his colleagues didn't share this outlook until external circumstances were altered unexpectedly and abruptly. According to Dr. Nathan, “Now we are in the midst of a financial crisis, which opens up opportunities to improve the system.”

The hospital director has always been on the lookout for new perspectives. He visited hospitals in Japan in search of architectural designs which would support implementation of leaner processes. He had studied in the USA, and is familiar with the situation in Switzerland, Germany, and Belgium. Dr. Nathan cultivates international dialogue. He has seen so much that is good as well as bad on his travels that he has arrived at this conclusion: “All highly developed →



PHOTO BY CENTRE HOSPITALIER EMILE MAYRISCH

Processes at Centre Hospitalier Emile Mayrisch, a hospital in Luxembourg, were optimized in an eight-week project





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DR. MICHEL NATHAN, DIRECTOR OF LUXEMBOURG'S  
CENTRE HOSPITALIER EMILE MAYRISCH

economies have similar problems, in that their healthcare systems are becoming too expensive as a result of demographic changes. You can travel the globe and still not find an expert who claims to have invented the perfect healthcare system. This is because no system has yet been created which perfectly balances efficiency, patient satisfaction and quality of results. Anyone who discovered the answer to this perplexing challenge would find himself in great demand.”

In looking at modern production methods used in the automotive industry, Dr. Nathan perceived that their approach could be applied to his own undertaking. If you can find a sensible way to balance efficiency and quality objectives, value creation automatically becomes the focal point. This means waste

is avoided and all resources are concentrated on the actual work. Particularly in hospital operations, this reorientation leads to greater patient satisfaction. And ultimately, this is the source of a hospital's reputation.

“Naturally,” says Dr. Nathan, “a hospital operates rather differently from a car plant, because each patient requires individual medical care. But nonetheless, there definitely are processes that can be improved by the flow principle from industry, without the patient having the impression that he is receiving assembly line-type treatment.”

Diagnoses are a good example. They typically take up 50 to 60 percent of available work capacity of hospitals. “This is an area where a more efficient

arrangement is essential in order to eliminate waste,” notes Dr. Nathan.

Moreover, with significantly tighter and more objective-oriented capacity control in operations, the urologist sees potential that the automotive industry has long since tapped into through smart planning. “The conveyor belt starts rolling in the early shift starting at 6 o'clock in the morning. Vehicles are produced in accordance with specified processes and at the same takt. In contrast, physicians use an operating room more from their own perspective rather than in terms of efficiency.” The result: Unnecessary vacancies causing unnecessary waiting times for patients. This is something the urologist wants to put a stop to. “It won't be long before such waste will become inexcusable. As long

as we doctors can't prove that we can work truly efficiently, politicians will be justified in hammering away at us."

Together with Porsche consultants, the experienced physician got straight to work. With capacity in existing OR areas increasing by 31 percent and a reduction in the total time required for preparatory (pre-hospitalization) tests prior to an operation, up to 98 percent of the most severe problems are now under control.

Even the board of directors voluntarily underwent an assessment according to the strict criteria of lean processes, and completed a workshop on optimizing itself. Dr. Nathan: "We were even able to organize our conferences more efficiently." The continuous improvement process (CIP) was initiated and a coach was hired. After such a promising start, things have kept rolling—thanks in part to the boss himself, who is closely watching developments both at the hospital and further afield. Just

recently, Dr. Nathan visited the Porsche consultants on their home turf in Bietigheim-Bissingen, and gave a lecture on: "Findings from a Visit to Hospitals in Japan." The consultants, too, want to learn from their clients. ←



Joining forces to successfully combat waste of resources: Project manager Klaus-Dieter Pannes (left) and the hospital's director Dr. Michel Nathan