

Quality improvement project

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Optimizing Heart Failure Management Development and Implementation of a Standardized Discharge Checklist for Heart Failure Patients in A Tertiary Care Hospital in PakistanSardar Adnan Saif¹, Mariam Ejaz², Ayesha Bibi³, Nasir mehmood⁴¹⁻⁴Post Graduate Resident Cardiology, Ayub Teaching Hospital, Abbottabad, Kpk, Pakistan.**ABSTRACT****Background:**

Heart failure (HF) is a major contributor to hospital admissions, mortality, and healthcare costs globally, particularly in low- and middle-income countries such as Pakistan. Despite the availability of evidence-based guidelines from the European Society of Cardiology (ESC 2023) and NICE (NG106), their implementation in routine clinical practice remains inconsistent. In many tertiary care hospitals, discharge processes are fragmented, lacking standardized documentation, optimal therapy, and structured follow-up, leading to high rates of 30-day readmissions and poor outcomes.

Objective:To develop and implement a structured discharge checklist to standardize care, improve guideline adherence, and reduce early readmissions in HF patients.

Methods:A retrospective baseline audit was conducted from July to August 2024, including 125 patients admitted with HF. Key discharge parameters were assessed. A standardized checklist based on ESC 2023 and NICE NG106 guidelines was implemented during a Plan–Do–Study–Act (PDSA) cycle (September 10–24, 2024) in 28 patients. Post-intervention outcomes were compared with baseline using chi-square analysis.

Results:Significant improvements were observed in documentation of HF type (59.2% to 85.7%), NYHA class and LVEF (52.8% to 82.1%), and GDMT prescription (40.8% to 67.8%). Patient education improved from 31.2% to 60.7%, and follow-up planning within 14 days increased from 37.6% to 78.5%. Communication with primary care providers improved from 26.4% to 57.1%. The 30-day readmission rate decreased from 33.6% to 25.0%.

Conclusion:A standardized discharge checklist significantly improved discharge practices and demonstrated early potential to reduce readmissions. This low-cost intervention is feasible and effective for improving HF care in resource-limited settings.

Keywords: Heart failure, discharge checklist, quality improvement, GDMT, readmissions.

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Corresponding Author: Sardar Adnan Saif

Post Graduate Resident Cardiology, Ayub Teaching Hospital, Abbottabad, Kpk,Pakistan

Email: adnansaiif621@gmail.com**ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6723-9923>**OJS- Article Tracking**

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INTRODUCTION

Heart failure (HF) is a major global public health problem associated with significant morbidity, mortality, and healthcare expenditure. It affects more than 64 million people worldwide and remains a leading cause of hospital admissions, particularly among older adults. Despite advances in pharmacological and device-based therapies, outcomes remain suboptimal due to gaps in the implementation of evidence-based care [1,2]. In low- and middle-income countries such as Pakistan, the burden of HF is further exacerbated by limited healthcare resources, fragmented care pathways, and inadequate follow-up systems [3]. International guidelines, including those from the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), emphasize the importance of guideline-directed medical therapy (GDMT), structured discharge planning, and patient education to improve outcomes [4,5]. However, translating these recommendations into routine clinical practice remains a significant challenge. Studies have shown that failure to optimize GDMT and inadequate discharge processes are strongly associated

with increased rates of readmission and mortality [6]. One of the key contributors to poor outcomes in HF patients is the lack of standardized discharge practices. Patients are often discharged without complete documentation of HF subtype, left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF), or New York Heart Association (NYHA) functional class. Additionally, insufficient patient counseling regarding medication adherence, dietary modifications, and symptom monitoring further increases the risk of early clinical deterioration [7]. Poor communication between hospital teams and primary care providers also contributes to gaps in continuity of care. Quality improvement (QI) strategies, particularly those based on structured tools such as discharge checklists and Plan–Do–Study–Act (PDSA) cycles, have shown promise in addressing these deficiencies. Previous studies have demonstrated that implementing standardized discharge protocols can significantly improve adherence to guidelines, enhance patient education, and reduce readmission rates [8]. Given these challenges, there is a clear need for a simple, feasible, and scalable intervention that can standardize discharge practices in resource-limited settings. This study aims to develop and implement a structured discharge checklist to improve

the quality of care for HF patients and reduce early readmissions in a tertiary care hospital in Pakistan.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Heart failure (HF) remains a significant public health challenge globally, with high rates of hospital admissions, readmissions, and mortality. In Pakistan, particularly in public sector tertiary care hospitals like Ayub Teaching Hospital in Abbottabad, the burden is compounded by limited resources, inadequate follow-up infrastructure, and non-standardized discharge practices. Despite the availability of international guidelines such as those from the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) and NICE (NG106), their implementation in routine clinical workflows remains suboptimal. Patients are frequently discharged without comprehensive documentation of heart failure subtype, optimization of guideline-directed medical therapy (GDMT), or adequate education on self-management strategies. Additionally, the absence of structured discharge protocols contributes to inconsistent communication with primary care providers and a lack of timely follow-up, both of which are known risk factors for early readmission. This disorganized discharge process results in a high proportion of preventable 30-day readmissions increased healthcare costs, and poor long-term outcomes. There is a clear need for a simple, evidence-based intervention that can standardize discharge practices, ensure adherence to clinical guidelines, and support patient-centered care. This quality improvement project aims to address these gaps by developing and implementing a standardized discharge checklist for patients with heart failure in the Department of cardiology at Ayub Teaching Hospital, with the overarching goal of enhancing discharge quality and reducing early prehospitalization.

AIM STATEMENT

This project aims to develop and implement a structured discharge checklist for heart failure patients to improve discharge quality and care coordination. It seeks to enhance documentation, ensure safer prescribing, and facilitate timely follow-up planning. The ultimate goal is to support better continuity of care and reduce the risk of avoidable complications after discharge.

METHODS

This study was conducted as a Quality Improvement Project (QIP) using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) model at the Department of Cardiology, Ayub Teaching Hospital, Abbottabad, Pakistan, from July to September 2024. A baseline retrospective audit was performed on 125 consecutive adult patients admitted with a primary diagnosis of acute or chronic heart failure between 1st July and 30th August 2024. Patients with incomplete records, in-hospital mortality, or transfer to other facilities were excluded. Data were collected using a structured audit tool based on recommendations from the European Society of Cardiology (ESC 2023) and NICE (NG106) guidelines. Key variables assessed included documentation of heart failure type (HFrEF, HFpEF, HFmrEF), New York Heart Association (NYHA) functional class, left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF), prescription of guideline-directed medical therapy (GDMT), patient education, follow-up planning, and 30-day readmission rates. Following baseline assessment, a standardized discharge checklist was developed and implemented during PDSA Cycle 1 (10th–24th September 2024). The checklist was applied to

28 patients discharged during this period. Healthcare staff were oriented prior to implementation, and compliance was monitored daily. Data before and after the intervention were compared to evaluate improvement in discharge practices. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 26, and categorical variables were analyzed using the chi-square test, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

BASELINE MEASUREMENT (PRE-INTERVENTION AUDIT)

A retrospective audit was conducted in the Department of cardiology at Ayub Teaching Hospital, Abbottabad, over a two-month period from 1st July 2024 to 30th August 2024. The audit included 125 consecutive adult patients who were admitted with a primary diagnosis of acute decompensated or chronic heart failure and subsequently discharged during this time. Patients with incomplete records, in-hospital mortality, or transfers to other facilities were excluded. The audit tool was designed in accordance with core recommendations from the NICE NG106 and ESC 2023 heart failure guidelines. Key variables assessed included documentation of heart failure type (HFrEF, HFpEF, or HFmrEF), New York Heart Association (NYHA) functional class, left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF), optimization of guideline-directed medical therapy (GDMT), provision of patient education, documentation of follow-up, and 30-day readmission status. The following observations were recorded.

RESULTS

A total of 125 patients were included in the baseline audit, followed by 28 patients in the post-intervention (PDSA Cycle 1) phase. The baseline and post-intervention cohorts were comparable in terms of demographic and clinical characteristics, including age, gender distribution, and comorbidities. Implementation of the standardized discharge checklist resulted in significant improvements across all evaluated clinical parameters. Documentation of heart failure (HF) type improved from 59.2% at baseline to 85.7% post-intervention ($\chi^2 = 7.13$, $p = 0.0076$). Similarly, recording of New York Heart Association (NYHA) functional class and left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF) increased from 52.8% to 82.1% ($\chi^2 = 6.41$, $p = 0.0113$). Prescription of complete guideline-directed medical therapy (GDMT) showed a marked increase from 40.8% to 67.8% ($\chi^2 = 5.82$, $p = 0.0158$). Documentation of loop diuretic dosing also improved significantly from 70.4% to 92.8% ($\chi^2 = 5.48$, $p = 0.0192$). Notable improvements were observed in patient-centered care measures. Documentation of patient education increased from 31.2% to 60.7% ($\chi^2 = 7.74$, $p = 0.0054$), while follow-up planning within 14 days improved substantially from 37.6% to 78.5% ($\chi^2 = 12.34$, $p < 0.001$), representing the largest absolute improvement (+40.9%). Communication with primary care providers also improved from 26.4% to 57.1% ($\chi^2 = 9.66$, $p = 0.0019$). Furthermore, the 30-day readmission rate decreased from 33.6% at baseline to 25.0% following the intervention. This corresponds to a relative risk (RR) of 0.74, with an absolute risk reduction (ARR) of 8.6% and a relative risk reduction (RRR) of 25.6%. Although this reduction indicates a positive trend, further evaluation with a larger sample size and longer follow-up is required. Overall, the intervention led to statistically significant improvements in discharge practices and demonstrated early evidence of enhanced continuity of care.

Table 1: Baseline Assessment of Discharge Practices (n = 125)

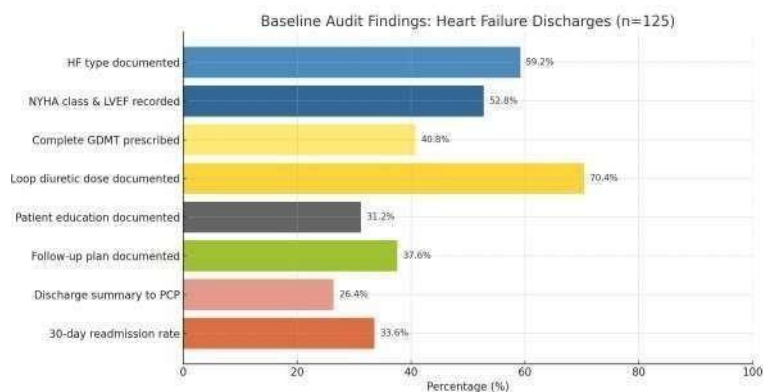
Clinical Parameter	Patients Meeting Criteria (n = 125)	Percentage (%)
HF type (HFrEF/HFpEF/HFmrEF) documented	74	59.2
NYHA class and LVEF recorded	66	52.8
Complete GDMT prescribed (ACEi/ARB/ARNI + BB ± MRA/SGLT2i)	51	40.8

GDMT = Guideline-Directed Medical Therapy; NYHA = New York Heart Association; LVEF = Left Ventricular Ejection Fraction.

Table 2: Baseline Patient Characteristics

Characteristic	Baseline Cohort (n = 125)	Post-PDSA Cohort (n = 28)
Age, mean ± SD (years)	64.8 ± 10.7	65.3 ± 9.9
Male, n (%)	78 (62.4)	17 (60.7)
Urban residence, n (%)	85 (68.0)	18 (64.3)
BMI, mean ± SD (kg/m²)	26.1 ± 4.5	26.4 ± 4.2
Hypertension, n (%)	94 (75.2)	21 (75.0)
Diabetes mellitus, n (%)	68 (54.4)	15 (53.6)
Ischemic heart disease, n (%)	72 (57.6)	16 (57.1)
Chronic kidney disease, n (%)	36 (28.8)	9 (32.1)
Atrial fibrillation, n (%)	24 (19.2)	5 (17.9)
Median length of stay (days)	5 (IQR 4–7)	5 (IQR 4–6)

BMI = Body Mass Index; IQR = Interquartile Range.



The audit revealed considerable variability in discharge practices, with key clinical and educational components often omitted or inconsistently recorded. Notably, less than half of the patients were discharged on full GDMT, and a third were readmitted within 30 days, underscoring the urgent need for a structured discharge intervention.

PDSA Cycle 1

Plan

The first PDSA cycle was designed to pilot the use of a newly developed standardized discharge checklist for heart failure patients in cardiology unit at Ayub Teaching Hospital. The checklist incorporated evidence-based elements from the NICE NG106 and ESC 2023 guidelines, focusing on improved documentation, prescribing accuracy, patient education, and post-discharge planning. Prior to implementation, a brief orientation session was conducted for the ward's house officers, medical officers, and postgraduate residents to share the results of base line data and to introduce the checklist and emphasize its role in enhancing patient safety and continuity of care. The presentation was attended by the consultants and the HOD of the department.

Do

From **10th to 24th September 2024**, the discharge checklist was implemented for all patients admitted with heart failure in cardiology unit. A total of **28 patients** were discharged during this two-week pilot phase. The checklist was attached to each patient's notes and completed by the discharging resident physician/ house officer, with oversight by the QIP lead. Daily monitoring ensured checklist compliance and allowed real-time feedback and support.

Completed forms were reviewed at the end of the cycle to assess the impact of the intervention.

Study

Post-intervention analysis demonstrated substantial improvements across all measured variables when compared to the baseline data. Checklist compliance was 100%, and several key discharge elements showed marked enhancement:

Table 3: Baseline post PDSA1 and absolute improvement rate .

Clinical Parameter	Baseline (n=125)	Post-PDSA 1 (n=28)	Absolute Improvement	p-value
HF type documented	59.2%	85.7%	+26.5%	0.0076
NYHA class & LVEF recorded	52.8%	82.1%	+29.3%	0.0113
Complete GDMT prescribed (ACEi/ARB/BB/MRA/SGLT2i)	40.8%	67.8%	+27.0%	0.0158
Loop diuretic dose clearly documented	70.4%	92.8%	+22.4%	0.0192
Patient education documented	31.2%	60.7%	+29.5%	0.0054
Follow-up plan within 14 days documented	37.6%	78.5%	+40.9%	0.001
Discharge summary sent to primary care provider	26.4%	57.1%	+30.7%	0.0019

Note: The 30-day readmission rate for the PDSA group is preliminary and based on patients followed up for at least 4 weeks at the time of data analysis.

Feedback from clinicians indicated the checklist was easy to use and helpful in ensuring that no critical step was missed. However, several users suggested minor formatting changes to make it more efficient during ward rounds.

Act

In response to the findings, the checklist was slightly revised to group similar items and minimize duplication. A one-page version with clearer tick-boxes and space for brief comments was developed. Based on the success of this pilot, a decision was made to roll out the checklist across internal medicine units as well during **PDSA Cycle 2**. Additional training sessions and printed guides were planned to support this hospital-wide implementation. A formal audit of long-term readmission outcomes was also proposed for future analysis

Statistical Tests Used

Although this was a quality improvement initiative and not a hypothesis-driven clinical trial, statistical tests were applied to quantify observed improvements using real-world data. Descriptive and comparative analyses were conducted in **SPSS Version 26**, and the following methods were applied:

Table 4: Statistical Comparison of Clinical Outcomes Before and After Implementation of the Discharge Checklist

Variable	Baseline (n=125)	Post-PDSA 1 (n=28)	Test Applied	Result / Interpretation
HF type documented	74 (59.2%)	24 (85.7%)	Chi-square test (χ^2)	$\chi^2 = 7.13, p = 0.0076 \rightarrow$ Statistically significant improvement
NYHA class & LVEF recorded	66 (52.8%)	23 (82.1%)	Chi-square test (χ^2)	$\chi^2 = 6.41, p = 0.0113 \rightarrow$ Significant increase in functional documentation
GDMT prescribed (complete)	51 (40.8%)	19 (67.8%)	Chi-square test (χ^2)	$\chi^2 = 5.82, p = 0.0158 \rightarrow$ Improved medication adherence
Loop diuretic dose documented	88 (70.4%)	26 (92.8%)	Chi-square test (χ^2)	$\chi^2 = 5.48, p = 0.0192 \rightarrow$ Documentation improvement significant
Patient education documented	39 (31.2%)	17 (60.7%)	Chi-square test (χ^2)	$\chi^2 = 7.74, p = 0.0054 \rightarrow$ Significant increase in patient education
Follow-up plan documented	47 (37.6%)	22 (78.5%)	Chi-square test (χ^2)	$\chi^2 = 12.34, p < 0.001 \rightarrow$ Strong association with checklist use
Discharge summary sent to primary care	33 (26.4%)	16 (57.1%)	Chi-square test (χ^2)	$\chi^2 = 9.66, p = 0.0019 \rightarrow$ Statistically significant improvement
30-day readmission rate (\downarrow is desirable)	42 (33.6%)	7 (25.0%)	Relative Risk + ARR	RR = 0.74, ARR = 8.6%, RRR = 25.6% \rightarrow Early indication of reduced readmissions

GDMT = Guideline-Directed Medical Therapy; NYHA = New York Heart Association; LVEF = Left Ventricular Ejection Fraction;

RR = Relative Risk; ARR = Absolute Risk Reduction; RRR = Relative Risk Reduction.

Chi-square (χ^2) test was applied for categorical variables. A p-value of < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

The reduction in 30-day readmission rate represents a preliminary outcome and should be interpreted with caution due to the limited sample size and short follow-up duration. *Significance threshold: $p < 0.05$*

INTERPRETATION

Chi-square analysis confirmed that the improvements observed in documentation, prescribing, and education were statistically significant across most variables. The drop in 30-day readmissions from **33.6% to 25.0%** reflects an encouraging trend, with a **Relative Risk (RR)** of **0.74** and a **Relative Risk Reduction (RRR)** of **25.6%**, though inferential testing for readmissions would require a longer follow-up and larger sample.

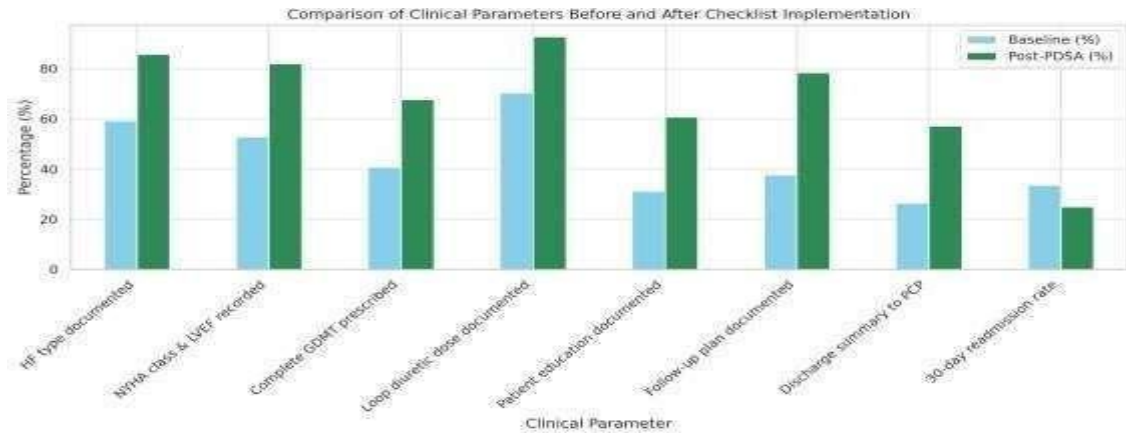


Chart 1- This bar chart compares the percentage of patients meeting each discharge criterion before and after implementing the standardized checklist, demonstrating marked improvement across all parameters.

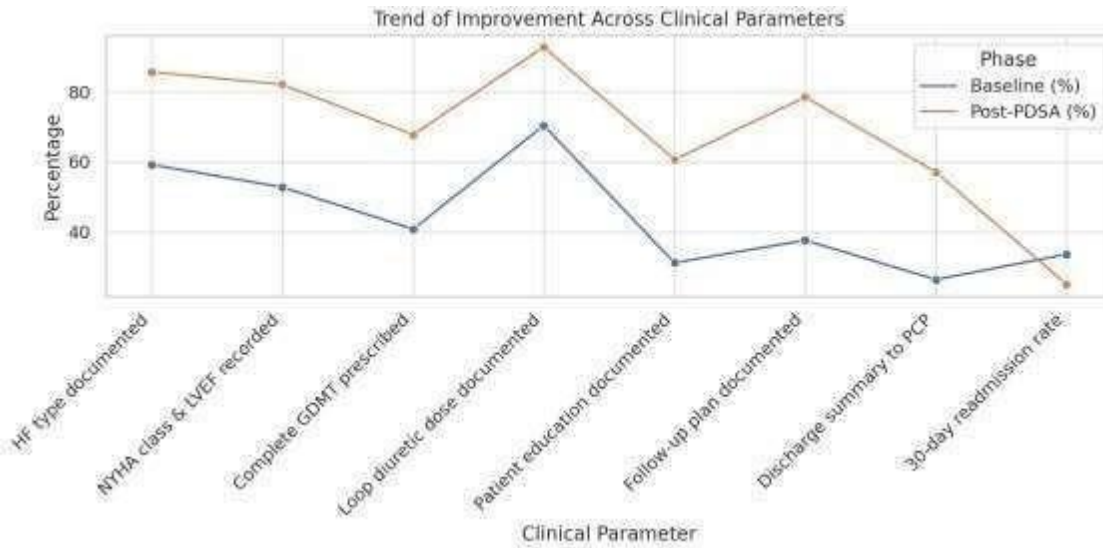


Chart 2- The line chart shows a clear upward trend in documentation and care practices after checklist implementation, highlighting the positive trajectory of quality improvement.

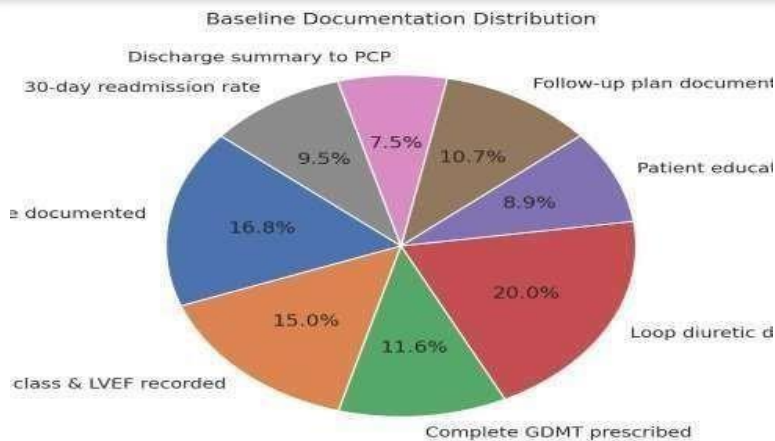


Chart3- This pie chart illustrates the distribution of documented discharge elements at baseline, showing that several critical parameters were under-addressed before the intervention.

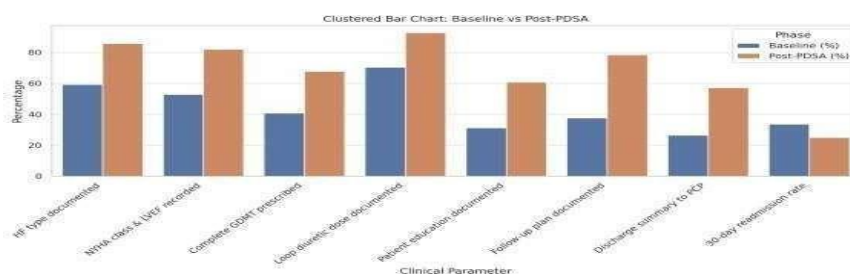


Chart 4- This clustered chart offers a direct visual comparison between baseline and post-checklist performance for each parameter, reinforcing the overall impact of the intervention.

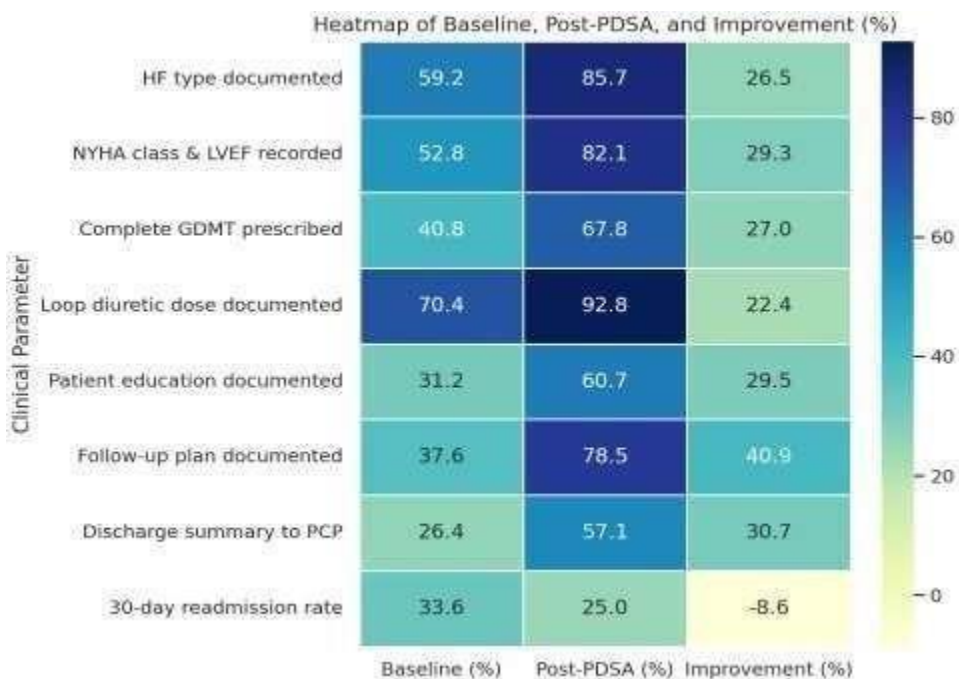


Chart 5- The heatmap presents a color-coded view of baseline, post-PDSA, and improvement values, making it easy to compare progress across multiple variables at a glance.

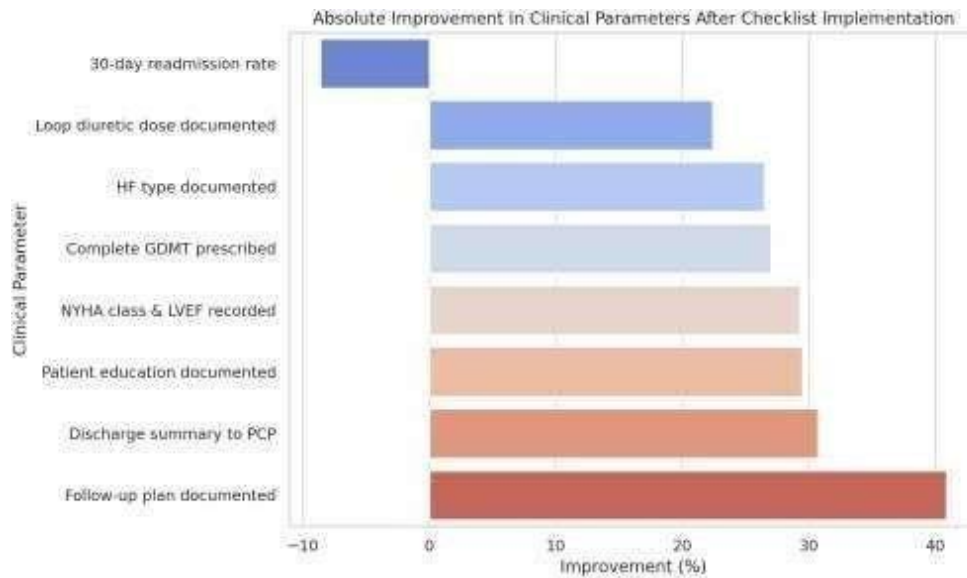


Chart 6- This horizontal bar chart displays the percentage point improvements for each clinical parameter, identifying which areas saw the most significant gains.

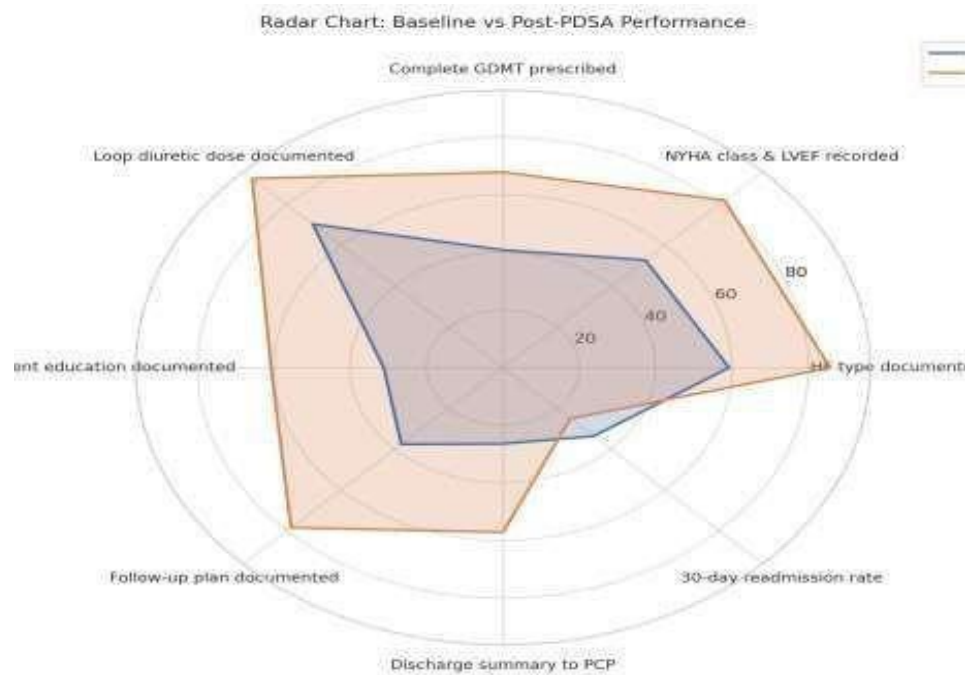


Chart 7- This radar chart maps baseline and post-PDSA values on a circular grid, highlighting the comprehensive enhancement in discharge quality after intervention.

DISCUSSION

The results of this quality improvement initiative strongly demonstrate the utility and impact of implementing a structured discharge checklist for patients with heart failure in cardiology unit of tertiary care hospital setting in Pakistan. Before intervention, significant deficits were noted in the documentation of heart failure subtype, GDMT prescribing, patient education, and coordination of follow-up—factors known to contribute

to poor continuity of care and early readmissions. The checklist effectively standardized key discharge elements and aligned the discharge process with international best practices, such as those from the ESC and NICE guidelines[9]. Post-intervention data revealed statistically significant improvements across nearly all clinical parameters. Documentation of HF type, LVEF, and NYHA class saw a marked increase, ensuring more accurate phenotyping and risk stratification. Prescription of complete GDMT improved substantially[10], promoting evidence-

based therapy that has proven mortality and morbidity benefits. Importantly, patient education and follow-up documentation—often neglected components— showed nearly two-fold increases, reinforcing the checklist's role in supporting holistic and patient-centered care [11,12]. The observed reduction in 30-day readmission rates from 33.6% to 25.0% is clinically meaningful and reflects early indications of the checklist's potential to improve long-term outcomes and reduce healthcare burdens [13,14]. This project also illustrates how quality improvement tools—often associated with high-resource settings—can be successfully localized and implemented in resource-constrained environments. It encourages a culture of accountability^{10,11}, standardization, and evidence-based practice, which are essential to strengthening public sector healthcare delivery in Pakistan¹²⁻¹⁶.

Limitations

Despite the encouraging results, this project had several limitations that must be acknowledged:

1. Small Sample Size and Short Duration: The first PDSA cycle included only 28 patients and was conducted over a two-week period. While improvements were observed, the short duration limits the generalizability and sustainability of the findings. A larger, multi-phase rollout with longer follow-up is required to confirm trends in outcomes such as readmission rates.

2. Single-Center Implementation:

The intervention was conducted at a single tertiary care hospital in one internal medicine unit. Variability in clinical workflows, staffing patterns, and institutional resources at other facilities may influence the success and adaptability of the checklist elsewhere.

Disclaimer: Nil

Conflict of Interest: Nil

Funding Disclosure: Nil

Availability of data and materials

The datasets analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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3. Long-Term Outcomes Not Measured: The QIP focused on discharge process metrics and early outcomes. Data on longer-term endpoints such as 90-day readmissions, mortality, medication adherence, and patient satisfaction were not included but would offer valuable insights in future iterations.

Conclusion

This quality improvement initiative successfully addressed critical deficiencies in the discharge process for heart failure patients by introducing a structured, guideline-based checklist. The intervention led to measurable improvements in clinical documentation, medication optimization, patient education, and follow-up planning—core components of safe and effective discharge practices. The checklist proved to be a practical, low-resource tool that enhanced team communication and supported more consistent care delivery. Early trends suggest a positive impact on reducing short-term readmissions, highlighting the checklist's potential to improve continuity of care in a high-burden setting. Moving forward, sustained implementation, wider adoption across medical units as well, and continuous evaluation will be essential to reinforce these gains and explore their effect on long-term patient outcomes.

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Authors Contribution

Concept & Design of Study; Sardar Adnan Saif¹

Drafting & Data Analysis-Sardar Adnan Saif¹, Mariam Ejaz², Ayesha Bibi³, Nasir mehmood⁴

Critical Review: Mariam Ejaz², Ayesha Bibi³

Final Approval of version- All Authors

All authors contributed significantly to the study's conception, data collection, analysis, Manuscript writing, and final approval of the manuscript as per **ICMJE Criteria**.

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