

Cause & Effect *Template*

A fishbone diagram template for exploring contributing factors across six categories. Turns a symptom into a mapped problem space.

A cause-and-effect diagram (also called a fishbone or Ishikawa diagram) helps the team explore the factors contributing to a problem, grouped into categories. It moves the team from guessing at solutions to mapping the problem space systematically.

Structure

The effect (the problem) sits at the head on the right. Major categories branch off the spine as bones. Specific causes within each category are drawn as sub-bones.

For refugee health QI, six categories usually cover the problem space well:

- **People** — roles, skills, capacity, confidence, cultural and trauma awareness, training
- **Systems** — software, workflows, appointment types, recall mechanisms, coding conventions
- **Environment** — physical space, waiting area, signage, opening hours
- **Data** — register quality, identification fields, coding consistency, reporting routines
- **Communication** — recall wording, interpreter use, patient-facing information, team coordination
- **Patient & family** — transport, work hours, language access, trust, settlement stage, prior experience of healthcare

TIP

Use the fishbone in a team brainstorm. One category at a time. Ask "why does that happen?" a few times for each cause to get past symptoms to root causes.

Worked example

EXAMPLE — INCOMPLETE REFUGEE HEALTH ASSESSMENTS (TOWNSVILLE FAMILY PRACTICE)

CATEGORY	CONTRIBUTING CAUSES
People	No named lead for refugee health coordination · reception unsure how to ask about preferred language · variable confidence among GPs in trauma-informed assessment
Systems	No "Refugee health assessment" appointment type · longer-appointment booking takes manual override · interpreter pre-booking not in standard reception workflow
Environment	Standard 15-minute slots only · no clear signage about interpreter availability · waiting area materials in English only
Data	Country of birth recorded inconsistently · interpreter need in free text rather than coded field · no monthly search to identify incomplete assessments
Communication	Recall SMS uses compliance framing · no script for interpreter-supported recall · family members sometimes used as interpreters by default
Patient & family	Working hours conflict with weekday appointments · transport from outer suburbs limited · prior experiences of healthcare systems vary widely · sensitive issues take multiple visits to disclose

Blank template

FILL IN WITH YOUR TEAM

EFFECT (THE PROBLEM)

CATEGORY	CONTRIBUTING CAUSES
People	
Systems	
Environment	
Data	
Communication	
Patient & family	

NEXT STEP

Group the contributing causes into themes and pick one to address first. Each theme becomes a candidate primary driver in the Driver Diagram (**Appendix 03**). Use the MFI worksheet in **Appendix 07** to turn it into a testable change.