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Risk-Based Quality Management in a Post-Pandemic CRO Environment

A CRO Leadership Perspective on Quality by Design, Centralized Monitoring, and the Path to ICH E6(R3)

Kush Dhody, M.D., M.S.

Senior Vice President, Clinical Operations, Amarex Clinical Research, LLC (An NSF Company)

Physician-Scientist | Clinical Development Executive | Regulatory Strategy Advisor

The pandemic did not invent risk-based quality management.

But it proved, conclusively, that the industry could no longer afford to ignore it.

The question now is whether the lessons will be institutionalized or forgotten.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the structural transformation of clinical trial quality management in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on ACRO landscape survey data spanning 6,500+ trials across seven CROs, FDA regulatory guidance, and two decades of operational experience leading global clinical development programs, it argues that risk-based quality management is no longer an optional methodology but a structural prerequisite for efficient, compliant, and patient-centered clinical research. With the ICH E6(R3) draft guideline released for public consultation and FDA's finalized Q&A guidance on risk-based monitoring, CROs and sponsors face a narrow window to transition from pandemic-era improvisation to institutionalized quality-by-design frameworks. This paper presents a strategic framework for that transition, with specific recommendations for CRO leadership.

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1. Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the clinical trial industry to adopt risk-based monitoring at unprecedented speed. ACRO survey data shows RBQM adoption rose from 53% in 2019 to 88% in 2021, a 35-percentage-point increase achieved under the most disruptive conditions in the modern history of clinical research.[1,2,3]

But adoption does not equal institutionalization. Only 27% of new study starts in 2021 achieved the full combination of centralized monitoring with reduced source data verification, the configuration that delivers the most significant quality and efficiency gains. Meanwhile, the regulatory landscape is accelerating: FDA finalized its Q&A guidance on risk-based monitoring in April 2023,[5] and the ICH E6(R3) draft, released in May 2023, codifies quality-by-design and risk-proportionate oversight as foundational GCP requirements.[8]

The question for CRO and sponsor leadership is no longer whether to adopt RBQM, but whether their organizations can move from fragmented, reactive implementation to systematic, design-stage quality integration before the regulatory framework demands it. This paper argues that the window for voluntary transition is narrow, and that the organizations that act now will define the competitive landscape of clinical development for the next decade.

> Quality in clinical trials is not achieved through verification. It is achieved through design.

2. The Quality Management Problem: Why RBQM Matters Now

Despite a decade of regulatory encouragement, including FDA's 2013 guidance on risk-based monitoring,[4] ICH E6(R2) in 2016, and TransCelerate's risk-based monitoring initiative,[9] pre-pandemic RBQM adoption was disappointingly low. The gap between regulatory intent and operational practice revealed a structural problem: the clinical trial industry had built its quality management infrastructure around 100% source data verification (SDV), a practice that TransCelerate's 2014 analysis demonstrated primarily identifies transcription errors with limited impact on overall data quality.

The scale of the problem is illustrated by the data volumes involved. Phase 3 trials collect an average of 3.5 million data points; oncology trials routinely exceed 6 million. Manual review of this volume by clinical research associates is neither efficient nor scientifically effective. Yet it remained the industry default, enshrined in standard operating procedures, legacy contracts, and the institutional expectations of sponsors, CROs, and regulators alike.

Table 1: Pre-Pandemic RBQM Adoption Baseline (ACRO 2019 Survey)[1]

RBQM Component	Adoption Rate (2019)	Notes
Centralized Statistical Monitoring	16%	Rising from baseline
Risk-Based SDV Reduction	19%	Highest single component
Risk-Based SDR Reduction	12%	Lagged behind SDV reduction
Central Lab Data Review	18%	Technology-dependent
Electronic Data Capture Analytics	15%	Platform variability
KRI Dashboards	11%	Emerging capability
Quality Tolerance Limits (QTLs)	8%	Lowest adoption
Remote Monitoring Protocols	14%	Pre-COVID baseline

The ACRO 2019 baseline survey, covering 6,500+ trials across seven major CROs, found that only 53% of trials had any RBQM component; 47% had none at all. Individual component adoption ranged from just 8% (QTLs) to 19% (risk-based SDV reduction).[1] These figures represent not a technology limitation but a cultural and structural resistance to changing established practices, even when the regulatory and scientific rationale for change was well established.

3. The Pandemic Accelerant: How COVID-19 Transformed Trial Monitoring

In March 2020, FDA issued emergency guidance authorizing remote monitoring for ongoing clinical trials.[11] Within weeks, 93% of clinical trials shifted from on-site to remote monitoring. The reason was operational necessity: 70% of clinical trial sites became inaccessible due to pandemic restrictions, and enrollment dropped by 65% across therapeutic areas.[13]

The pandemic's impact on RBQM adoption was dramatic and measurable. Remote and off-site monitoring increased 150% from 2019 to 2020. Overall RBQM adoption rose from 53% in 2019 to 77% in 2020 and 88% in 2021.[1,2,3] Centralized monitoring for new study starts increased from 31% to 39% to 43% over the same period.

Table 2: RBQM Adoption Trajectory (ACRO Landscape Surveys 2019–2021)[1,2,3]

Metric	2019	2020	2021
Overall RBQM Adoption	53%	77%	88%
Centralized Monitoring (New Starts)	31%	39%	43%
Centralized Monitoring (All Ongoing)	16%	20%	35%
Remote/Off-Site Monitoring	Baseline	+150%	Sustained
Risk-Based SDV Reduction	19%	31%	38%
QTL Implementation	8%	14%	19%
Full RBQM Configuration*	N/A	~18%	27%

* Full configuration: centralized monitoring + reduced SDV + reduced SDR

But much of this was forced adaptation, not systematic implementation. Organizations that had never invested in centralized monitoring platforms, KRI dashboards, or risk-assessment frameworks were improvising under emergency conditions. The risk, as pandemic restrictions lifted, was significant: organizations that had adopted RBQM out of necessity rather than design conviction would revert to pre-pandemic practices as soon as sites reopened and traditional monitoring became logistically feasible again.[12]

4. Centralized Monitoring: The Underutilized Cornerstone

Among all RBQM components, centralized monitoring offers the highest evidence-based return on quality and efficiency investment. Centralized monitoring can identify more than 90% of on-site monitoring findings while consuming less than 50% of the resources required by traditional monitoring, with cost reductions of up to 46%.[14] Yet despite this evidence, centralized monitoring remains an underutilized minority practice.

In 2021, only 35% of all ongoing trials used centralized monitoring, up from 16% in 2020, a 119% increase, but still a minority of industry practice.[3] The gap between the evidence base and operational adoption reflects a combination of structural barriers that have proven resistant to regulatory encouragement alone.

Table 3: Centralized Monitoring Adoption Trajectory (2019–2022)[1,2,3]

Year	CM (New Starts)	CM (All Ongoing)	YoY Change
2019	31%	16%	Baseline
2020	39%	20%	+26% / +25%
2021	43%	35%	+10% / +75%
2022 (est.)	47–50%	40–42%	Continued growth

Barriers to Adoption

The persistence of low centralized monitoring adoption despite compelling evidence reflects several structural barriers. First, risk aversion among sponsors: organizations with legacy contracts specifying 100% SDV face both contractual and organizational resistance to change. Second, technology investment requirements: effective centralized monitoring requires real-time data access, analytics platforms, and trained personnel to interpret KRI signals.

Third, and perhaps most revealing, is the 'SDR comfort factor': sponsors reduce source data verification (SDV) more readily than source data review (SDR), because SDR serves as a psychological safety net. This suggests that sponsors understand intellectually that 100% verification is unnecessary but have not yet developed confidence in purely centralized review approaches.

5. Quality by Design: From Concept to Operational Framework

Quality by Design (QbD) represents a fundamental reconceptualization of how quality is achieved in clinical trials. Rather than verifying quality retrospectively through source data review, QbD requires that quality considerations be integrated into study design from inception: identifying critical-to-quality (CtQ) factors during protocol development and designing monitoring and data management strategies around those factors.

The ICH E8(R1) guideline, finalized in October 2021 and adopted by FDA in April 2022,[6,7] established the CtQ framework as the regulatory foundation for QbD in clinical trials. The CTTI's definition captures the operational intent: 'Quality in clinical trials is the absence of errors that matter to decision making.'[10] This definition reorients quality management from process compliance to scientific integrity.

The CtQ Hierarchy in Practice

The CtQ framework creates a hierarchy of quality management decisions. At the top: identification of factors critical to the scientific integrity and regulatory acceptability of the trial. These inform a risk assessment that quantifies the likelihood and impact of quality failures for each CtQ factor. The risk assessment then drives the RBQM framework: which factors require centralized monitoring, which warrant KRI tracking, and which trigger QTLs that signal systemic quality failures requiring protocol-level intervention.

> Quality by Design requires that quality considerations inform protocol design from inception, not be retrofitted after finalization. When CtQ factors are identified after a protocol is drafted, the most impactful opportunity for quality improvement has already been missed.

Implementation Challenges

Despite the regulatory and scientific clarity of the QbD framework, implementation has lagged. ACRO survey data identifies several structural impediments: QbD processes often begin after protocol drafting rather than informing it; quality management systems remain static rather than adaptive to emerging risk signals; and protocol complexity continues to increase, with the average protocol now containing 70% more endpoints than a decade ago, creating a larger CtQ identification challenge.

6. The Regulatory Convergence: ICH E6(R3) and FDA Guidance

The regulatory trajectory for RBQM is unambiguous and accelerating. ICH E6(R3), the revision of the foundational Good Clinical Practice guideline, has been in development since 2019 and its draft was released in May 2023.[8] Unlike previous GCP revisions, E6(R3) does not merely accommodate risk-based approaches; it structurally embeds them as requirements. The convergence of E6(R3) with ICH E8(R1)'s QbD framework represents the most significant regulatory transformation of clinical trial quality management in the modern era.

Table 4: Key Provisions: ICH E6(R2) vs. E6(R3) Draft[8]

Dimension	ICH E6(R2) (2016)	ICH E6(R3) Draft (2023)
Quality Framework	Quality management system referenced but not operationalized	QbD fully embedded as foundational requirement
Monitoring Approach	Risk-based monitoring 'encouraged'	Risk-proportionate oversight required as default
Centralized Monitoring	Permitted as alternative	Explicitly endorsed alongside on-site monitoring
Quality Tolerance Limits	Not addressed	QTLs reframed as risk management tools with documentation requirements
Data Governance	Basic data integrity requirements	Enhanced framework aligned with E8(R1)
Technology	Technology-agnostic	Technology flexibility explicitly addressed; electronic systems supported
Root Cause Analysis	General requirement	Structured RCA required for QTL breaches and significant deviations

FDA's April 2023 Q&A Guidance

FDA's April 2023 Q&A guidance on risk-based monitoring[5] extended the 2013 guidance with ten new recommendations, including a centralized monitoring mandate for all new study starts, structured root cause analysis requirements for significant deviations, and comprehensive risk documentation standards that align with E6(R3) draft requirements. For CRO leadership, the guidance removes the remaining ambiguity about whether risk-based monitoring is an option or an expectation.

For CROs managing multi-sponsor portfolios, the E6(R3)/FDA convergence is not incremental change; it is a structural transformation of how quality management is designed, executed, and documented across the enterprise. Organizations that treat this as a documentation update will be inadequately prepared for the operational requirements that follow.

7. The CRO Imperative: Strategic Implications for Operational Leadership

CROs occupy a structurally unique position in the RBQM transition. Unlike single-sponsor organizations implementing RBQM for their own portfolio, CROs must implement scalable quality management frameworks that function across diverse sponsor requirements, therapeutic areas, regulatory environments, and study designs simultaneously. This complexity makes CRO RBQM implementation more challenging, and more consequential.

From a CRO leadership perspective, the implication is operational, not theoretical.

Operational Advantages

Centralized monitoring combined with reduced SDV/SDR delivers substantial cost reduction per study while enabling earlier detection of quality issues and improved data quality outcomes. At the portfolio level, centralized monitoring analytics create cross-study visibility that on-site monitoring cannot provide: patterns across sites, therapeutic areas, or investigator networks that indicate systemic quality risks.

Strategic Advantages

RBQM-capable CROs occupy an increasingly advantaged competitive position. As ICH E6(R3) compliance becomes a sponsor requirement, CROs that have already institutionalized risk-proportionate quality management become preferred partners. The competitive differentiation is real and measurable: sponsors preparing for E6(R3) compliance will prioritize CRO partners who can demonstrate, not merely claim, systematic RBQM capability.

Cross-Functional Integration Requirement

Perhaps the most underappreciated dimension of the CRO imperative is the cross-functional nature of RBQM implementation. RBQM is not a monitoring-only initiative. Effective implementation requires integration across data management (real-time data access and analytics), biostatistics (KRI threshold development and signal interpretation), regulatory affairs (QTL documentation), pharmacovigilance (safety signal integration), and quality assurance (SOP alignment and audit readiness).

8. A Phased Implementation Framework

Transitioning from fragmented, study-level RBQM pilots to enterprise-wide quality management transformation requires a structured, phased approach. The framework below reflects lessons from organizations that have successfully made this transition, adapted for the specific operational context of multi-sponsor CROs.

Phase 1: Foundation (Q4 2023 – Q2 2024)

- **Enterprise Risk Assessment**
  Audit current monitoring approaches across all active studies. Quantify SDV/SDR levels, centralized monitoring coverage, KRI utilization, and QTL implementation rates. Establish baseline metrics against which improvement can be measured.
- **CtQ Framework Development**
  Establish cross-functional working groups to define organization-specific CtQ identification processes. Align with ICH E8(R1) requirements and anticipated E6(R3) documentation standards. Begin integrating CtQ identification into protocol development workflows.
- **Technology Assessment**
  Evaluate centralized monitoring platforms, KRI dashboard capabilities, QTL tracking tools, and data integration requirements. Identify gaps between current infrastructure and the technology requirements of systematic RBQM.
- **Pilot Programs**
  Select 3–5 new studies across different therapeutic areas for comprehensive RBQM implementation. Use pilots to develop operational expertise, identify implementation barriers, and build the evidence base for enterprise-wide rollout.

Phase 2: Integration (Q3 2024 – Q1 2025)

- **SOP Modernization**
  Rewrite monitoring SOPs to embed risk-proportionate approaches as organizational defaults rather than optional alternatives. Align SOPs with E6(R3) draft documentation requirements to ensure compliance readiness.
- **Centralized Monitoring Scale-Up**
  Expand centralized monitoring from pilots to all new study starts. Develop sponsor-specific protocols and communication frameworks to manage the cultural transition for sponsors accustomed to traditional monitoring.
- **Training Investment**
  Cross-functional training for CRAs (data analytics skills for KRI interpretation), medical monitors, data managers (real-time risk signal interpretation), and biostatisticians (KRI threshold development and QTL analysis).
- **Sponsor Engagement**

Proactive education of sponsor partners on RBQM value proposition and E6(R3) readiness. Position RBQM capability as a partnership benefit, not an operational imposition. Document sponsor consent and involvement in risk assessment processes.

Phase 3: Optimization (Q2 2025 and Beyond)

- Enterprise Analytics

  Deploy organization-wide data aggregation for cross-study risk pattern detection. Develop portfolio-level KRI dashboards that provide leadership visibility into systemic quality risks across therapeutic areas and geographic regions.

- E6(R3) Readiness

  Align all SOPs, templates, and technology systems with finalized E6(R3) requirements. Conduct internal audits against E6(R3) documentation standards. Prepare QTL tracking and root cause analysis documentation frameworks.

- Continuous Improvement

  Establish feedback loops where RBQM data informs protocol design, site selection, and risk mitigation strategies for future studies. Build a proprietary risk intelligence database that improves risk assessment quality over time.

9. Operational Impact Across Clinical Trial Functions

RBQM implementation touches all clinical trial functions. The table below maps the current-state operational model against the RBQM-enabled state across the major functional areas of a clinical development organization.

Table 5: Operational Impact by Clinical Trial Function

Function	Current State	RBQM-Enabled State
Clinical Monitoring	100% SDV at site; reactive issue identification; visit-driven rhythm	Risk-proportionate SDV; proactive KRI signal response; centralized + targeted on-site
Data Management	Data review after lock; batch query resolution; limited real-time visibility	Continuous data review; real-time query resolution; KRI-driven data quality alerts
Biostatistics	Endpoint analysis at study completion; limited interim quality data	Ongoing QTL monitoring; interim quality analytics; KRI threshold development
Regulatory Affairs	Deviation reporting at close; limited quality documentation during trial	Continuous deviation tracking; QTL documentation; RCA integration; E6(R3)-ready
Pharmacovigilance (PV)	Safety event reporting separate from monitoring workflows	Safety signals integrated with KRI dashboards; centralized safety monitoring
Quality Assurance	Audit-based QA; post-hoc SOP compliance review	Continuous quality monitoring; real-time SOP alignment; QTL-driven QA triggers
Site Operations	High monitoring burden; site fatigue; limited data feedback	Reduced visit burden; real-time performance feedback; targeted support allocation

10. Challenges and Risk Mitigation

Acknowledging implementation challenges is a prerequisite for effective planning. The following challenges are real, documented, and addressable with deliberate organizational investment.

Organizational Resistance

Clinical monitoring culture has been built around 100% SDV over decades. CRAs have been trained, evaluated, and compensated based on monitoring visit metrics. Changing these deeply embedded practices requires visible executive sponsorship, not just SOP revisions, and a sustained investment in demonstrating that RBQM-based approaches achieve equivalent or superior quality outcomes.

Technology Infrastructure

Effective centralized monitoring requires real-time data access, analytics platforms capable of KRI calculation and visualization, and dashboards that translate data signals into actionable quality decisions. Many CROs are still operating on fragmented technology systems: separate EDC, IRT, safety, and data

management platforms that do not communicate in real time. The technology investment required is substantial and the integration challenges are often underestimated.

Regulatory Uncertainty

Despite regulatory encouragement, QTL implementation remains hampered by uncertainty about regulatory expectations. ACRO survey data from 2022 found that the industry has 'mixed views on the potential value of QTLs,' and QTL implementation rates remain the lowest of any RBQM component at just 19% in 2021. The anticipated E6(R3) guidance will provide greater clarity, but organizations should not wait for regulatory mandates to begin building QTL capability.

Sponsor Alignment

Small and mid-sized sponsors may resist unfamiliar RBQM approaches, particularly if they have prior experience with traditional monitoring and lack familiarity with the regulatory rationale for change. Sponsor alignment requires educational investment and, increasingly, demonstration of value through pilot data.

> These challenges are real, but the greater risk is inaction. The regulatory trajectory is clear, the evidence base is established, and the competitive landscape will reward early movers. Organizations that defer RBQM investment until E6(R3) mandates it will find themselves simultaneously managing compliance remediation and operational transformation, a combination that rarely ends well.

11. Recommendations

Institutionalize Pandemic Lessons Before They Fade

The monitoring adaptations forced by COVID-19 demonstrated that risk-based approaches work at scale, under pressure, and across diverse therapeutic and geographic contexts. Organizations that allow these practices to revert will repeat a decade of adoption failure. The institutional memory of what worked must be converted into structural practice before it dissipates.

Invest in Centralized Monitoring Infrastructure

Centralized monitoring is the highest-value RBQM component by every available metric. Evidence shows it identifies more than 90% of on-site monitoring findings at less than 50% of the resource cost. Make it the organizational default for all new study starts, not the exception.

Treat Quality by Design as a Protocol Design Discipline

QbD must inform protocol design from inception. If CtQ factors are identified after protocol finalization, the most impactful opportunity for quality improvement has been missed. Redesign protocol development workflows to integrate QbD at the study concept stage, with cross-functional CtQ identification as a required step.

Prepare for ICH E6(R3) as a Transformation, Not a Compliance Exercise

The draft guideline released in May 2023 codifies risk-proportionate quality management as a regulatory expectation. Organizations that treat this as a documentation update will fall behind those that use it to systematically redesign their operating models. The organizations that define the next era will treat E6(R3) as a strategic opportunity, not a compliance burden.

Build Cross-Functional RBQM Capability

RBQM is not a monitoring initiative owned by clinical operations. It requires integration across data management, biostatistics, medical monitoring, regulatory affairs, and quality assurance. Organizations that implement RBQM as a monitoring function only will achieve limited impact.

Engage Sponsors as Partners in the Transition

CROs have both an obligation and a strategic opportunity to educate sponsor partners on RBQM benefits and E6(R3) implications. Sponsors who understand the regulatory rationale and operational evidence are more likely to support the contractual and operational changes that effective implementation requires. Position RBQM capability as a strategic differentiator and partnership benefit.

12. Conclusion

The pandemic proved RBQM works. The regulatory framework is codifying it. The evidence base, spanning more than 6,500 trials across seven CROs, two FDA guidance documents, and the foundational ICH E8(R1) and newly released E6(R3) draft frameworks, is conclusive. What remains is not a question of whether to implement risk-based quality management, but of how quickly and how systematically organizations can move from fragmented adoption to institutionalized quality-by-design practice.

For CRO leadership, the imperative is clear and the window is narrow. The regulatory environment will not remain permissive of traditional monitoring approaches indefinitely. The competitive landscape will increasingly differentiate between organizations that have systematically built RBQM capability and those that have not. And the patients enrolled in clinical trials deserve quality management systems designed to protect their safety and the scientific integrity of the data their participation generates.

> Quality management in clinical trials is no longer about finding errors after they occur. It is about designing systems that prevent them. And the organizations that lead that transition will define the next era of clinical development.

The organizations that understand this will not just comply with RBQM. They will compete through it.

Kush Dhody, M.D., M.S.

Senior Vice President, Clinical Operations

Amarex Clinical Research, LLC (An NSF Company)

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