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A Brief Review of Healthcare System Transformation Directions

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ABSTRACT: The health care systems globally are undergoing constant changes and redesign processes within the framework of increasing patient expectations and increasingly challenging objectives related to the health of populations, cost reduction and improvement of health care quality. New approaches of healthcare reimbursement and payment are being implemented with the aim to contain costs. In parallel, there are relentless efforts to improve the quality of care through the reorganization of the healthcare team, increasingly relying on evidence, putting the patients at the centre of care, and greater participation of the patients in the process of healthcare. Overcoming the fragmentation of health systems is a major challenge for most countries of the world. In this light, healthcare system innovation and transformation, in order to meet the expectations of the patients, healthcare professionals and other stakeholders involved is of critical importance. System thinking offers an opportunity for healthcare professionals and experts of health system administration, management and strategic planning to fine-tune the health system so that it can fulfil its aspirations.

KEYWORDS: Health system, Healthcare, Health Administration, Health Management, Health System Reform, Innovation, Strategic Planning, System Thinking.

1. INTRODUCTION

Virutally in all countries the health care system is undergoing a large number of changes and redesign processes within the framework of increasing patient expectations and increasingly challenging objectives related to the health of populations, cost reduction and improvement of health care quality. The health care environment is being dominated by a number of changes, the most important of which are related to health care policies, financial reforms, and innovation in the health care system. If the above elements are placed in the context of the extraordinary progress of information technology in the field of health care and the equally extraordinary and rapid increase in the amount of health information generated by increasingly complex systems and sub-systems, as well as the need to process, analyze and interpret the enormous amount of information available, it is understandable that the challenges are substantial and major. These challenges will change the way patients receive health care from the health care system, and they will also change the ways in which health care professionals deliver appropriate health care.

At a higher level, all these challenges and changes are the responsibility of evidence-based policy-making and decision-making. It is clear, therefore, that the policies of administration, management and strategic planning of the health system are essential if we want to build a health system that provides high quality health care, within existing resources, at the right time and that responds optimally to the needs of patients or its users.

2. TOWARDS REDUCING OF THE HEALTH CARE COSTS

Policies related to reducing health care costs are constantly pushing forward changes and transformations, sometimes radical, in almost all countries of the world, to make health care more financially affordable. Such initiatives may include improving the health insurance scheme, increasing health insurance coverage and reducing the number of uninsured, initiatives to reduce health care costs, etc. (1- 3).

Reforms related to the payment of health care staff are also diverse, according to the modality of health care reimbursement in each country (Bismarck system or social insurance, Semashko system, system based on general taxation or direct out-of-pocket payment system – the four classic models of reimbursement in the health system, or any type of "hybrid" type reimbursement system) in an effort to increase the satisfaction and motivation of health care providers and to increase the quality of health care. Today's trend is that, in systems where the reimbursement of health care provision is based on the quantity of services provided, the reimbursement is no longer based on the quantity of these services but on the basis of high quality health care, thus moving to performance-based

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reimbursement (which means paying health care providers based on meeting certain standards or quality requirements in health care) [4,5]. Of course, to achieve this it is necessary to have access to the appropriate use of electronic patient records, doctors and other health personnel as well as the system as a whole must be responsible for designing and implementing the best ways to increase the quality of health care, by, for example, reducing the inappropriate use of resources, implementing the best modalities to improve or achieve the best possible results, promote changes to achieve objectives, etc. [4, 5]. Likewise, the myriad other forms of reimbursing health care providers for the services they provide (group reimbursement, shared savings plans, etc.) are likely to require new and innovative approaches to the delivery of health care process, in an effort to reduce costs and improve the quality of health care. Undoubtedly, these reforms and changes mean that health care professionals at every level will need to understand, accept and acquire the necessary skills to work individually or in teams, in order to achieve the best possible results. (6, 7).

3. INNOVATION OF THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

An important topic related to the issues of administration, management and strategic planning in the health system is innovation and transformation in the health care delivery system, to achieve the improvement of the health of the population through a satisfactory experience of patients or users with the process of providing health care but keeping to the necessary minimum the costs of the health service (8-10). In almost all countries, the problem of fragmentation of health systems is encountered, which is superimposed to inadequate processes of communication and cooperation between all stakeholders involved in the process of providing health care (11). The results of these anomalies usually include increased costs, decreased effectiveness of health care, increased levels of medical errors that decrease safety for patients, inappropriate modifications of various aspects of the doctor-patient relationship during the clinical decision-making process, the non-compliance of what health care offers with the health needs of the population and especially the most vulnerable groups, etc. (12-14).

Today's trends in health care innovation and transformation aim to achieve alignment of the health care system with health care goals for patients and populations by appropriately distributing resources to those who need them most. To achieve this, it is necessary for health systems to be increasingly based on teamwork models where collaboration between health care professionals is optimized, implying a re-dimensioning of the way these professionals consider other health care professionals of the health care team, how they coordinate between them and in the wider contexts of the health system, but also a re-dimensioning of the ways of engagement of patients, families and social networks in the health care process (15-18). In this process, social factors of health can play a major role, which encourage health care professionals to consider different elements of the communities where patients live when designing health promotion and disease prevention programs and interventions. In this perspective, it is clear that health systems are increasingly paying attention to the population and patients, marking a transition towards population-based care (19-20).

Closely related to the issue of transformation of the health care system is the dimension of the transformation of information technology and data in the health system. As we mentioned, the data that is already generated and collected by health care systems everywhere in the world is growing exponentially, leading to the necessity of health information technology to process and analyze it for the benefit of increasing the quality of care, health, policy-making and decision-making in the field of health (21). These data are opening new horizons at every level of health care practice and the health system in general, bringing new challenges at the same time that must be understood and recognized by health care professionals, leading to the adaptation or redesign of the system and technology resources at the point of delivery of health care in order to improve the health of patients and the population as a whole.

4. PRE-REQUISITES FOR CHANGE AND REFORM IN THE HEALTHCARE SECTOR

4.1 System thinking

In order for health system reforms and changes to be successful, it is recommended that they be made based not on the traditional approach, which is grounded on identifying problems and solving them step by step, but on the approach of "system thinking". System thinking implies a holistic approach to understanding not just current problems, as and when they arise, but to understand all parts and contexts of the health system as well as the relationships, inter-dependencies or inter-connections between these parts of the health system, in an attempt to understand in detail how the health system works and changes over time (22-25). In contrast to problem-based thinking, where problems are identified and solved in a logical way by proposing the corresponding solution, systems thinking requires not only to identify but also to examine and take into consideration the visible and invisible basic factors, connections and the consequences of the various and complex interactions in any given situation; systems thinking, therefore, means that the health

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system must be examined as a whole while evaluating its individual components in order to understand the system and its ways of responding (22-25). For example, in order to provide patient-centered health care (a goal of almost all health systems everywhere in the world today, but also in the future), it is not enough to simply examine the patient and then to give the appropriate prescription, based on the appropriate diagnosis, but it is necessary to take into consideration the wider condition of the patient, his or her situation, the social determinants of health for this individual patient but also the environment where this patient lives, where he was born, the circumstances of his formal education, the circumstances and work environment as well as a number of other factors related to health, quality of life, daily activity and additional risk factors, as well as the interactions of this patient with health personnel and the health system in general; then, based on the philosophy of system thinking, the health personnel must offer the right solution even in the conditions when the health system is not yet ready to offer optimal care (22-25).

It is clear that the approach of system thinking is based on the philosophy that knowing the specific parts of the system is not enough to understand the system as a whole, because considering the components of the system separately and as un-connected to the system as a whole makes it impossible to understand the processes of cohesion and the functional aspects of the entire system since these connections are lost or become invisible during the analysis (22-25). Also, the system which is created from separate parts or components, gives life to a series of certain characteristics or behaviors that are not manifested by any of the separate components on their own; in a way, this means that a system that is made up of a certain number of certain components initiates and internalizes behaviors and characteristics not previously thought and that were not predicted or anticipated based on the behavior and characteristics of the individual components that make it up (22-25). Therefore, the system as a whole is a different entity and not just a mechanical summation of the separate components that have created it, since the functioning of the system includes cohesion, interaction between components at multiple and complex levels (22-25). For these reasons, a system cannot be analyzed and evaluated only by studying separately the specific components that make it up; in this perspective, system thinking offers the only optimal opportunity to address issues related to the care of individual patients or the entire health system as a whole in order to improve health care and achieve better care healthcare outcomes (22-25).

4.2 The healthcare system is a complex environment in constant change

It is clear that health care delivery systems are based on a large number of structures and processes, which form a very complex system, in order to provide optimal health care to patients. For this reason, experts or researchers should recognize that the health care system consists of an extremely large number of components and systems that interact and influence each other continuously, contributing to the formation and dynamic change of the system itself; in other words, the health care system is a complex system in constant change and therefore health care professionals and other experts must have the knowledge, skills and ability to apply system thinking in order to initiate, promote and facilitate change at every level of the health system (22-25).

5. CONCLUSION

Health systems across the world are in constant change and transformation in pursuit of cost-effectiveness of healthcare. Patient centered healthcare systems need knowledgeable and skilled healthcare professionals and administration, management and strategic planning experts able to apply system thinking for overcoming health system challenges and achieve value-based healthcare.

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