Health promotion and health services. Management for change


According to the Ottawa Charter, ‘health services need to embrace an expanded mandate, and their role must move increasingly in a health promotion direction, beyond their responsibility for providing clinical and curative services’. ‘Reorienting health services requires stronger attention to health research as well as changes in professional education and training. This must lead to a change of attitude and organization’.

Changing health services represents a crucial challenge for health promotion in regards to different attitudes and feelings among health professionals, health managers and community leaders. Some professionals and managers are happy for the system stay just as it is not only because of the pre-existing power relations, but also because they perceive health promotion as visionary, unprofessional and unsuitable to answering real health needs. On the other hand, some health-promotion activists adopt a revolutionary approach, sometimes refusing to build realistic paths towards their goals. As a result, the health sector is often abandoned to traditional approaches, and activists find it easier to work in more supportive contexts like schools, cities and communities.

In their book “Health Promotion and Health Services”, Anne Johnson and Kevin Paton combine vision and practice, offering a resources package for professionals and managers aiming to act as change agents to develop in their context a path towards health promotion.

In the first part, the authors define their vision, evidence based and rooted in health promotion principles. They find that reorienting health services is not necessary because it is ethic, but due to its effectiveness. In the rest of the book, they offer not only a range of methods but also a number of tools in order to enable the reader to act effectively for change.

The pragmatic approach the authors adopt can irritate health-promotion activists, ready to challenge the power balance, but could be closer to the vision of managers and professionals facilitating their involvement, and therefore be more useful for action.

However, methods and tools are presented neutrally, facilitating a critical approach in reading and using the book. The reader does not need to share the vision of the authors to find useful suggestions and instruments, to reflect on his/her own setting and opportunities for change, building his/her own way to change. And, according to Voltaire, “…the most useful books are those of which readers themselves compose half; they extend the thoughts of which the germ is presented to them; they correct what seems defective to them, and they fortify by their reflections what seems to them weak”.

Paolo Contu

The economics of cancer care


This interesting book is more or less what its title promises. Instead of only focusing on the economics of cancer care, it “…examines the interaction of economics and the delivery of cancer care in the global context”. As a result of the collaboration between a health economist and an oncologist, the book reviews the evidence supporting the general strategies for improving cancer prevention and care, incorporating the evidence on their economic affordability. Moreover, the two authors discuss the likely impact of future treatments and the need for new management strategies.

The rationale for this book, and more widely for an interest in the economics of cancer care, is clearly described in the first chapter. Cancer prevalence is increasing due to both improving incidence (mainly for breast, colorectal and prostate cancers) and survival. However, prevalence is increasing also because of improved cancer diagnosis and care. Cancer as a chronic, controllable disease, like diabetes, remains a long-term scenario.

It is indisputable that global cancer prevalence is likely to increase over the next decades. The authors, in six specific chapters of the book, review the global policy of cancer in terms of prevention, screening, diagnostics, surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy. For each chapter, they try to answer the critical question: “Can the goal of achieving excellence in cancer services be attainable only for the minority of affected patients and within a privileged few nations?” For each dimension, the authors, after reviewing the cost-effectiveness of available procedures–treatments–interventions, try to delineate future affordable strategies.

This core of the book could benefit from a deeper analysis of the potential of applying large-scale programmes supporting clinical governance on the processes of care. For example, for prostate cancer, the increasing prevalence (in the USA by more than 100% in the last 10 years) is mostly due to the more widespread inappropriate use of Prostate Specific Antigen testing. It would have been helpful if the authors had discussed whether this increase could be modified by greater attention to sensitivity and specificity before screening programmes are introduced, perhaps through effectiveness appraisals.

A chapter that I would have liked to see is “palliative care”. The authors state that a large part of the cancer budget has been spent on care associated with the last 6 months of life (page 142). Investing more into palliative care could be important to improve the quality of care provided and in ensuring access to services. This should be part of the national cancer strategies and be integrated into the cancer programmes.

The last part of the book includes an interesting discussion of the possible future scenarios. The new agenda discusses some feasible options (ie, the need for national cancer strategies, and of integrated programmes), based upon a model of international promising practice. The most interesting sections discuss the need and the preliminary architecture of a new model of cancer care with new roles and responsibilities. The need is for a model which “…leads towards balanced and co-ordinated investment in prevention, screening and treatment and follow up care”.

In a global context where the funding of cancer care is becoming a significant dilemma, this book is a valuable scientific contribution to the debate. Although the main target is policy makers, every health professional should also read and discuss it.

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