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Conference Abstract

A system approach to health and social care integration: a theoretical proposal

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Abstract

Introduction: One of the key developments in the health policy literature at the international level over the last decades has been the theoretical articulation of the concept of health system. A system is an identifiable set of interdependent elements forming a purposeful whole and the interactions of the elements of the system make the system evolve. In its simplest form, the system is represented in terms of: inputs, functions, processes, outputs and outcomes.

Thus, according to the 2000 World Health Report, entitled "Health Systems: Improving Performance", despite countries vary greatly in the way they organise their own health system, all health systems should pursue some combination of goals and objectives. Health systems are meant to reduce the burden of illness, impairment and disabilities among individuals in an equitable way and through processes that are deemed to be responsive to individual preferences and their dignity as human beings. Importantly, health systems should offer social protection against catastrophically costly illnesses.

Theory/Methods: While the concept of health system has been established firmly within the health policy literature - actually underpinning current debates on health system performance measurement, universal health coverage, stewardship, etc.- it does not seem to have latched within the literature on integrated care. The paper will thus engage with this literature to explore whether and how the system approach has been discussed.

Our working hypothesis is that the literature on health and social care integration has focused on the coordination and integration of services, organizations and processes, rather than systems. Furthermore, the integration of health and social care revolves around the integrating principle of patient-centred care, which seems to collide with an emphasis on systems.

Thus, the two key research questions that structure our paper are:

- Does a system approach to integrated health and social care collide with the patient-centred care principle?
- When pursuing the integration of both systems, where should we connect them - at the point of inputs, functions, processes, intermediate goals or final goals?

Results/Discussions: We will argue that a systemic approach sensitizes us to understanding the whole network of health and social care programs and services as a system of care which integrates multiple efforts from various sectors, organizations and actors.

Secondly, we will argue that the patient-centred care principle that underpins health and social care integration does not clash with an understanding of an integrated system of health and social care; rather the contrary, such patient-centre principle is both the antidote to:

- a mechanic understanding of how both health and social care systems work and;
- a input-/functions-/processes-oriented view of integration (and points instead to a results-based integration approach).

Finally, we will argue that both systems need to integrate first and foremost at the point of goals and will suggest which we believe those are.

Suggestions for future research: We believe that a system approach to health and social care integration established upon the agreement on the intermediate and final outcomes to be achieved would help move the integrated care theory and practice to a whole new dimension.

Keywords

integrated care; health system; social care system; WHO Health Report; system theory

PowerPoint presentation

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