The Vital Role of Performance Intelligence in Managing (Post-) COVID-19 Health Systems

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“Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.” Marie Skłodowska Curie

Right now, there is a tremendous opportunity out there. An opportunity to use the available data to understand the factors that hinder optimal performance of healthcare systems, and to identify impactful and manageable ways of addressing them. Data, performance, understanding and impact – those are some of the key concepts of the discipline of performance intelligence in health, which can be defined as “the structured approach to acting on health policies, using knowledge and information generated by the application of scientific methods to comparable healthcare data to systematically measure indicators of health systems performance.”

Simply put, to work with performance intelligence is to measure, to govern and to utilise. This includes measuring how health systems and services perform, setting up performance-based governance mechanisms and using this intelligence to steer and support policy actions.

Indicators count! They represent quantified measures of health service and system quality, and need to be meaningful, scientifically sound, generalisable, and interpretable. Indicators should come with a clear purpose and should be fit for use. They are not perfect and come with comparability, actionability and adaptability issues, but they are the best we’ve got. And, with time and effort, indicators also keep getting better.

Results-based governance is a way of thinking about leadership and management where health system and services performance data, turned into actionable information and knowledge, are integrated into meaningful health care governance mechanisms. This presents a transformation from data-focused health systems based on accountable organisations to data-driven learning health systems based on the integration of services. Strategies to support such transformation include improving ownership of the data (by both patients and service providers), enhancing competencies in harvesting the potential use of available performance data and dedicating sufficient resources to making the best out of what is already collected. This approach presents a shift from performance data being used solely as an accountability and scrutiny measure, towards one less focused on mandatory measurements and prioritising the use of data for decision-making.

Using performance intelligence in policy- and decision-making allows health systems to be managed with a bi-focal perspective, incorporating both person-centred and population-focused approaches. It enables integration within and across health services, supporting the focus on areas and activities that matter the most now: pandemic response and dual-track health system management, long-term care, mental health care, patient engagement, quality improvement (including outcomes), system resilience, transparent and accountable public reporting – just to name a few.

With all this potential of systematically and scientifically approaching performance intelligence in health, I believe the EU has to act. Supporting research and educational programmes such as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network for Healthcare Performance Intelligence Professionals (HealthPros) is an excellent start. HealthPros is an international training network providing innovative, collaborative, multidisciplinary, and entrepreneurial training 13 PhD students with varying backgrounds (e.g., health sciences, medical informatics, medicine, biological sciences, business administration, statistics, and economics).

In six locations around Europe, HealthPros Fellows work on a cohesive set of individual research projects related to measurement, governance and utilisation aspects of working with performance intelligence. I strongly believe that a harmonised approach towards developing and using performance intelligence in health care—and creating a professional workforce to spearhead this process – should be one of EU action’s focus policy areas in the upcoming years.

References:

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Priority areas from Young Gasteiners


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