Innovation and the Hippocratic Oath

In this issue of the World Hospitals and Health Services Journal, we once again showcase some of the winners of the International Hospital Federation innovation and recognition awards. The Hippocratic Oath - one of the most widely known of Greek medical texts - is an oath historically taken by doctors. It requires them to swear, by a number of healing deities, to uphold specific ethical standards.

δέμιμα Απόλλωνα ἰητρὸν καὶ Ἀσκληπιὸν καὶ Υγείαν καὶ Πάνακαν καὶ θεοὺς πάντας τε καὶ τάσσας, ἰστόρας ποιεύμενος, ἐπιτελέα ποιήσεις κατά δύναμιν καὶ κρίσιν ἐμὴν ὅρκον τόνδε καὶ συγγραφὴν τὴνδε:

I swear by Apollo the Healer, by Asclepius, by Hygieia, by Panacea and by all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my ability and judgment, this oath and this indenture.

Two central tenants of the Oath are the principles of medical confidentiality and non-maleficence. “I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrong-doing.”

Innovation in health care is therefore double-edged sword. On the one hand innovation requires thinking outside the box, breaking with convention by trial and error - trying new things that might work better but might not. Disruptive technology breaks with convention and tries something radically new that disturbs the existing balance of things. All of this is done in the name of better patient care, improve quality, efficiency, cost savings and many other praiseworthy objectives.

Yet we also know that some of the best clinical outcomes – both surgical and medical - are associated with time-tested interventions, perfection through repetition, and minor incremental improvements at the margins. Like the pianist conducting a “Master Class” the medical apprenticeship approach, is based on the student initially imitating the “Grand Master” not risking patient safety and clinical outcomes though rash new ways of doing things that have not been proven to work.

This is one of the greatest dilemmas in innovation in healthcare – finding better ways to do things but without ever resulting in “injury and wrong-doing.”

In this Issue of the WHHS Journal, Anne-Grete Skjellanger looks at “Reforming the Norwegian Healthcare System through the Norwegian Patient Safety Program”, Wei-Chun Huang looks at “Reforming the Norwegian Patient Safety Program”. Wei-Chun Huang looks at “Reforming the Norwegian Healthcare System through an Innovative Lean Six Sigma Approach.” Anupama Shetty looks at “Improving maternal health perceptions and outcomes through multiple interventions: Using the complex adaptive systems approach.”

Consistent with the “do no harm” principles, Jill Alvarez looks at “The Eleven Year Journey of Manila Doctors Hospital in Institutionalizing Climate Change Mitigation Actions”. In the article, Consonci Sanitarri del Garraf (CSG) – Our way to efficiency”, Rosa Simón applies the principles of “learning by doing”.

Improved outcomes and patient safety is also an underlying concern in the other articles on innovative approaches in this issue of the Journal: “Shared Governance: Transforming the Nursing Workforce through Collective Decision Making” by Hoi Shu Yin; “Introducing a Multifaceted Approach to Improving Regional Diabetes Care” by S. Pillai; “Achieving High Reliability Through Care Coordination for Patients Who Require Emergency Surgery” by Sepan Desai; and a “Nationwide Student Health Physical Examination in Tuvalu” by Shao-Chuan Wang.

The International Hospital Federation is committed to supporting its members and other health care providers more broadly, in this quest for balancing the potential of new and innovative approaches with a concern for improve outcomes and patient safety. The articles in this issue of the WHHS Journal on projects that won awards, demonstrate that the quest for improvement never ends. It is an activity undertaken by many, not just those recognized by the IHF Awards. Everyone engaging in this process should be acknowledged and recognized. For this reason, the IHF website provides a platform that hosts many projects undertaken by its members in addition to the top recipients of the awards. We hope that this repository of innovative projects will encourage additional efforts in the ongoing quest to improve of health services.

The IHF awards offer to Health service providers a unique opportunity to showcase their achievements and demonstrate that while keeping high level of safety and patient orientation, it is also possible to innovate and make dynamic improvements to health services. The driver for innovation can be found again in Hippocratic Oath spirit by always trying to do better for patients while mitigating associated risks.