Health Care Management Competencies

The articles in this issue of the World Hospitals and Health Services (WHHS) Journal of the International Hospital Federation (IHF) showcase recent trends in competencies in health care management training and accreditation programs.

There was a time when the vaunted qualifications of hospital directors were to be respected clinicians well-liked by their peers (few women made it into this select and exclusive club). Usually, Physician-Directors continued with clinical practice, maintained their dual function as medical directors and spent little time on their management duties. They relied on their administrative staff to manage the hospital or health services for which they were responsible—department heads, director of finance, facilities manager, head nurse and others. These leaders were also often politically active, splitting their medical and management duties with political careers as community leaders and even as members of parliament and national political leaders. Invariably, their health care management duties were often neglected.

Those times are over. In most OECD countries, having a medical license and clinical training as a specialist alone is no longer considered an acceptable qualification to be a health care or hospital manager, although remnants of the old system are still seen throughout the world, especially in developing countries.

As highlighted in the lead article on the “Commission on Accreditation of Health Management Education (CAHME)”, health care management today is an independent professional tract that usually requires a Master’s degree or even a PhD in a related discipline.

Health care management today has evolved into a “hybrid discipline” where training is provided by a diverse range of institutions, such as public health programs, MBA programs, financial institutions and others.

This has led to the need for a framework that will assess which institutions, programs, teachers and students meet certain criteria in terms of performing their health care management duties. This being a nascent field, countries, training institutions and health care providers have approached it differently, which has led to a lack of clarity in setting minimal “acceptable” standards as well as “best practice” gold standards.

The Commission on Accreditation of Health Management Education is one among many organizations that have tried to come up with a standardized approach, becoming increasingly influential in the process, both in the USA and elsewhere.

A major challenge remains in striking an appropriate balance between breadth and depth. A health care manager really needs to be a “renaissance” man/woman. Academic and practical training has to lead to an understanding of topics as diverse as politics, policy making, leadership, government/public functions, private sector/market functions, communications, finance, accounting, human behavior, negotiations, dispute resolution as well as at least some technical knowledge of health systems, health care structure/function, epidemiology, social determinants of health and illness, diseases, treatment, rehabilitation, etc. The list is extensive.

Not surprisingly, many existing training programs like public health programs, MBAs and clinical specialization fall short of these goals. Increasingly specialized health care management programs have been set up to address these shortcomings, cutting across disciplines and reaching out to applicants that have much more diverse backgrounds than the historical focus on life science and medicine.

The IHF is committed to working with its members in moving beyond Minimal Standards and reaching Gold Standards in health care management competencies.

A major landmark was achieved in 2015 with the adoption of the global competency directory for healthcare leadership and management, thus building the foundation for an international approach in support of professionalization in the field of healthcare management.

Since 2015, significant progress has been made in defining and requiring a competency-based approach in both graduate education and continuous professional development. The IHF works with academic institutions and professional associations to promote the use of a competency-based approach. It makes this available through its online, multi-language, self-assessment tools on core competencies (https://healthmanagementcompetency.org/base/).

For some countries and institutions, the journey ahead may be long but worth the effort. By striving to reach best practice standards in training, licensing and the assessment of competencies in healthcare leadership and management, different countries and institutions have an opportunity to learn from the experience of others, while adapting the details to their own needs and capacities. Over time, such a continued development process in leadership and management practices will translate into improved performance in the delivery of health services.

The IHF has been supporting its members in this process by acting as a catalyst and a convener. As an international membership organization, it is the natural home for such action. It acknowledges that the positive results achieved so far over the last 5 years are largely due to the commitment and action of its members from around the world representing most influential academic institutions and professional associations.