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Regional Health Information Networks: Towards Sustainable Health Systems Globally

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Abstract

There has been tremendous growth in regional health information organizations (RHIOs) in the US. There has been emergence of similar networks in the UK, Australia, Singapore, Greece, and New Zealand.

Keywords:

community health networks; regional health planning; information networks; collaboration

Background

Globalization has had an impact in accelerating the development of regionalism in the delivery of health services throughout the globe. There has been tremendous growth in regional health information organizations (RHIOs) in the US. There has been emergence of similar networks in the UK, Australia, Singapore, Greece, and New Zealand.

The value of networks arises principally from the enrichment and extension of the social frameworks that motivate human behavior by creating social capital. Such features of social capital in networks are knowledge sharing and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Mutual knowledge can be characterized as shared experiences or close mutual understanding of the respective contexts of individuals. This allows network participants to identify shared problems and communicate solutions and individual experiences in a meaningful way.

Trust is necessary to pass on tacit knowledge from one network member to another. Accepting the contributions and suggestions of other network members require trust in each individual's expertise. Sharing one's expertise with other network members requires trust that shared knowledge will be used appropriately. Trust in networks is built through repeated rounds of interaction that allows network members to make judgments about the trustworthiness of others.

There are a number of examples throughout the globe where regional health information networks are emerging. In Australia in New South Wales, the Greater Metropolitan Transition Taskforce has programs networking sixteen specialty services, enabling the coordination of activities over a population of at least 5 million (Braithwaite, 2004). These networks enable different types of clinicians to work with management and community representatives over many administrative boundaries. The taskforce has demonstrated the ability of institutions to learn from each other in comparing practices, benchmarking performance, developing innovations and testing alternative systems. (Southon, 2005). Such a structure has worked in conjunction with regional bodies, maintaining and developing standards for integrated health services with the local Boards responsible for local coordination of the different services, and for addressing local issues.

There has been development of a regional health information network in Greece in the island of Crete. (Constantinides & Barrett, 2006). A Greek initiative urged all healthcare regions in Greece to develop regional networks. This regional network received the European eHealth award for technologically advanced design.

In the US, the Indianapolis Network for Patient Care links major hospitals, physicians, and public health sharing information such as lab results, medications and immunizations. (McDonald, 2005). The Utah Health Information Network (UHIN) grew out of a coalition of health insurers, hospitals to create value for all participants and is comprised of providers who pay an annual fee.

Methods

We utilized a brief information gatheirng of the emergence of regional healthh networks throughout the globe. Then we conducted a series of key informant interviews with key health care decisionmakers in the US and UK. These individuals were selected based on knowledge of regional networks. Multiple interview formats were used with the key informants.

Conclusion

Sustainable health systems involve shaping and adapting health information networks to a given regional context. This means cultivating regional learning processes and embedding collaborative and knowledge sharing that persist over time. Establish such networks create opportunities for sharing of experience, knowledge, technologies between the various nodes of the network. Embediing these change processes over time requires

understanding, engaging with the specific dynamics around sensemaking and knowledge sharing.

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