Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute

MANAGEMENT OF SERVICE NETWORKS IN PRIMARY HEALTH CARE:
APHCRI 2010 TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIP

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POLICY CONTEXT

Contemporary health care problems associated with ageing related chronic conditions tend to be complex, ongoing and are usually multi-factoral. Services for chronic conditions involve input from a network of health and social care providers. Hence, theoretical and methodological work is required to assist managers in the development of quality and performance in service networks.

KEY FINDINGS

Origins, trust and reciprocity: Service networks can naturally emerge from amongst members, or be mandated from above, but all require trust and reciprocity to be succesful and sustained.

Stability and change paradox: Network stability enables trust and reciprocity, but instability is always a potential because members make a commitment assuming that others will also commit, which can never be assurred. Because trust is relational, networks built on previous relationships are more likely to succeed.

Pay off function: Managers need to build legitimacy of the network, resolve conflict, reaffirm commitment and articulate accountability so that members can see more benefit than cost (pay off).

Models: Management models vary in brokerage of management functions and participation of network members. Three models are: (a) self management, (b) lead organisation and (c) network administrative organisation. With increased complexity & accountability (b) & (c) are more appropriate.

Boundary spanners and network hinterland: Core network members are boundary spanners who facilitate the flow of resources between the network and members' home organisations (network hinterland). Network members should have the authority and be supported by their home organisation.

Participatory evaluation: Feed back of network data enables members to assess costs and benefits of participation and identify actionable points for change. This needs careful management because of sensitivities and risks in revealing a member's network position and linkages.

Facilitating change: There is some evidence that network change is achieved by first changing the practical outputs (what the network does), which may then lead to later change (or even no change) in the values and assumptions held in the network.

For more details, go to the three page report