

SUMMARY

The Health System Efficiency Challenge: A research and knowledge transfer strategy

2008

CONTEXT IN WHICH THE STRATEGY WAS DEVELOPED

The research and transfer strategy on health system efficiency is part of phase II of the *Perspectives STS* project (science, technology, society) conducted by the Council for Science and Technology. This original and ambitious project, launched in 2003, takes a forward-looking approach and comprises several consultation stages. Its goal is to determine the need for new knowledge to address the major socioeconomic challenges facing Québec over the next two decades. One of the objectives of *Perspectives STS* is to foster closer ties between scientists and those who use the new knowledge and technologies. The efficiency of the health system is one of the seven major issues selected during the consultation process. The challenge can be defined as follows: “Increase the efficiency of the public health system in an environment dominated by an aging population, while controlling costs.”

THE STEERING COMMITTEE’S MANDATE

In 2006, a steering committee established by partners working on this issue and comprising researchers and research users from different backgrounds was tasked with developing a research strategy to meet the challenge. The committee’s goal was to improve links between research and the health care system. Adopting a comprehensive approach that goes beyond setting research priorities, the committee sought to identify the multidisciplinary research resources necessary for understanding all the factors and interrelationships influencing the evolution of the health care system, and to determine what is needed to translate research results into improving the health care system. The committee met six times over nearly one year between May 2006 and February 2007.

STEPS

Over this period, the committee:

- Replaced the issue of health system efficiency in a global context
- Broadened its approach to the challenge to include the performance of the health care system
- Defined the conceptual framework for reflecting on the issue
- Identified objectives
- Made an assessment of Québec’s health care system, its knowledge needs, and the instruments required to meet these needs
- Did an inventory of researchers, research groups, doctoral and postdoctoral students, research projects, and funding on the issue

- Identified the key factors concerning the training of researchers, research development, and the use of research results
- Identified courses of action to incorporate into a research strategy and the best means of accomplishing them

APPROACH ADOPTED BY THE COMMITTEE

It was obvious to the committee that the efficiency of the health care system could not be addressed without taking into account the values underlying the system — equity, solidarity, and the right to the best quality health care available without discrimination — and without taking into consideration other performance aspects associated with efficiency. The health system's performance is based on a combination of factors, and can be assessed by comparing how well the system's objectives are met to what it is capable of accomplishing. In other words, it means achieving the best possible results with given resources.

The committee started by studying the needs of Québec's health care system, identifying persistent weaknesses, and identifying potential areas for improvement. To be more efficient, the system should have the following characteristics:

- Greater emphasis on prevention and health promotion
- Greater stakeholder involvement
- Better cooperation between and within professions, and between organizations and sectors
- A best practice model more adapted to the current situation
- A client-centered approach to service
- Better integration of information and communication technologies
- A more results-based management approach
- Expanded ongoing training to encourage the adaptation of management and professional practices

ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

- Given the limited and aging research resources in Québec, most disciplines do not have sufficient critical mass to protect them from attrition

- Young researchers are present, but their position is fragile due to the lack of university positions, and there are very few in the social sciences
- Many fields of research expertise have been established only recently. This is the case for nursing, primary care, and information and medical technologies, among others
- Expertise on health economics is very underdeveloped
- Growth in evaluative research has slowed due to the absence of ongoing financial support
- Social and community aspects of the system have been little studied and poorly integrated
- The interface between the research community and the health care system is inadequate, discouraging the transfer and adoption of knowledge by decision makers and other stakeholders in the system
- Funding is inadequate in comparison with other health research sectors and with the rest of Canada

RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The examination of how research is organized made it clear that knowledge transfer and appropriation are key factors for improving health care system efficiency, because it is not so often knowledge that is the problem but its translation into practice. There is a big gap between research and the translation of research results. Better linkages between researchers and the health care system are necessary to increase and improve the utilization of research results. Much of this strategy is devoted to actions aimed at improving knowledge transfer and translation. It also recommends that a substantial effort be made to ensure the integration of a new generation of researchers, given the small size and the advanced age of the existing cohort, and the absence of critical mass in most sectors.

A total of 28 strategic actions were formulated, grouped under five major themes. They include the creation and funding of a permanent information sharing network made up of researchers, decision makers, managers, practitioners, and citizens; the creation and funding of research teams and chairs, career fellowships, especially for clinicians-scientists, and a training program in health economics; the development of measures to facilitate tenure-track positions at the universities; and the creation of a center for knowledge transfer as well as a series of measures to improve knowledge transfer.

POTENTIAL COURSES OF ACTION FOR MEETING THE CHALLENGE

1 – Invest in research sectors with strong potential impact:

- Themes associated with the values underlying the system
- Strategies and interventions related to health determinants
- Professional practices in a changing organizational context
- Organization transformation and management
- Social and community aspects
- System efficiency and optimal resource use
- Knowledge utilization
- Database access and utilization

2 – Create a space for permanent dialog between researchers and users to encourage greater involvement on the part of citizens, decision makers, managers and healthcare workers in identifying research priorities, and to bring about a better balance between research and the needs of the system.

3 – Prepare the next generation of researchers by developing expertise in health economics and emphasizing the training of young researchers in disciplines that will soon be lacking them, while stressing an interdisciplinary approach and cooperation with healthcare workers in the field.

4 – Maximize knowledge utilization by devoting a significant share of the research budget to knowledge transfer, creating a knowledge transfer center, establishing a concerted action program to foster research on the transfer and translation of knowledge, and including transfer activities in the evaluation criteria of peer committees.

5 – Increase research funding so that it reaches a fixed and significant fraction of the annual health system budget.

IN CONCLUSION

Upon completion, the strategy document was subjected to a small consultation by five experts in the field to test its external validity and make any necessary changes. The final document includes the viewpoints of researchers and experts on issues of health care system efficiency, as well as those of research users, both healthcare workers and government decision makers. In addition, representatives from granting agencies involved in the initiative acted as observers at committee meetings.

The value of this research strategy lies in the fact that it takes into account the observed weaknesses in the organization of the health care system, and that it is based on an up-to-date assessment of research on system efficiency. It is unique because it goes beyond setting research priorities and addresses the overall organization of research.