LEADING FOR SUSTAINABLE HEALTH SYSTEMS

Dr Mark Avery

Editor-in-Chief, Asia Pacific Journal of Health Management

A sustainable health system is a foundation of any growing and developing society. A broad perspective of health is needed across acute, aged and social care systems. A focus on sustained well-being of its citizens provides happiness, safety and longevity in individuals and fosters economic development and growth. Emerging and managing healthcare sustainability involves multifaceted aspects of what constitutes a sustainable health system. Not surprisingly they align to the key elements or foundation components such as accessibility, affordability, quality of care, preventive measures, and the role of technology.

Leaders play are pivotal in healthcare sustainability, yet their impact can be diluted. While some leaders champion innovative practices and resource optimisation, there is need to address systemic issues. Authentic and effective governance, adequate financial stewardship, and strategic foresight affects sustainable healthcare models. Leaders need to beyond significant short-term gains, emphasising long-term ecological and economic viability. Collaboration, transparency, and a commitment to evidence-based policies are essential. Without visionary leadership, healthcare sustainability remains elusive and fragmented. This perpetuates the challenges that compromise the well-being of both the system and its beneficiaries. We have the systems that we have built and we will get the systems that we build.

A critically important beginning and future for a sustainable health system involves ubiquitous accessibility. Access to health care should be fair and equitable. The aim is to ensure that individuals and families, regardless of socioeconomic, geographic location, or demographics have the means to receive needed health promotion and care. This involves creating a system network of health care provision encompassing urban and rural areas as well as reaching marginalised communities and those who are underserved.

Affordability at system and individual levels involves economic balance. Restrictive or damaging financial impediments should not prevent individuals from seeking and receiving the care needed. A sustainable health system has structural features that can reduce the economic burden on consumers. These can include subsidised healthcare services, social and private insurance coverage, and cost-effective preventative and treatment policies. Financing and funding starts from social determinants of health, recognising that many factors like education, housing, and employment impact an individual's or a family's overall well-being.

Sustainability extends beyond accessibility and affordability to the quality of care provided. A robust health system emphasises evidence-based practices, continuous training for healthcare professionals, and the implementation of the latest medical technologies (technology seen in its broadest definition). Quality assurance mechanisms, such as accreditation programs and regular evaluation, are essential to maintain and improve standards, whilst a quality improvement agenda enables reflection and development. Patient-centred care, emphasising communication and shared decision-making, enhances the overall quality of healthcare services.

A sustainable health system is proactive, placing a strong emphasis on preventive measures to reduce the burden of illness. Contemporary health care needs concerted rebalancing between preventative and promotion activities with that of curative and rehabilitation. Public health initiatives, education campaigns, and vaccination programs are vital components of a comprehensive strategy. By promoting healthy behaviours and addressing risk factors, the health system can minimise the prevalence of diseases, leading to a healthier population and reducing demand on healthcare resources.

In the 21st century, technology plays a pivotal role in the sustainability of health systems. Technology in its broadest sense involves medication management, models of care, information and communications and biomedical development and application. Electronic health records, telemedicine, and health information systems optimise procedures, improve communication among healthcare professionals, enhance quality and safety as well as enabling the smooth interchange of information. Artificial intelligence and data analytics contribute to early diagnosis, personalised treatment plans, and the efficient allocation of resources. Integrating technology not only improves healthcare delivery but also fosters innovation and adaptability. These requiring a system that is open to innovation translation and change to face evolving health challenges.

Building a sustainable health system involves active community engagement. Communities should be involved in stewardship, decision-making processes, health promotion initiatives, and the design of healthcare services. Cultivating a sense of ownership and responsibility within communities enhances the effectiveness of health interventions and promotes a culture of health-conscious living.

Sustainability of health systems is an international concern. Sharing best practice, pooling resources, and addressing global health threats contributes to building resilient health systems that can withstand challenges such as preventative, curative and rehabilitative health status. Recently there has been and is considerable learning from the COVID-19 pandemic related to technology and system management and the realisation of how different systems and actors addressed what are common community engagement issues.

Sustainable health systems are not universally identical but tailored to each country's unique values, needs, resources, and challenges. Cultural norms, economic conditions, as well as existing systems and infrastructure influence the design and effectiveness of healthcare models. The core principles of accessibility, affordability, and quality remain crucial but flexibility and adaptability are key to address diverse health landscapes. Global collaboration and shared knowledge contributes to refining and enhancing individual nations' health systems. Such engagement fosters a collective effort towards achieving sustainable and equitable healthcare on a global scale.

The work of the researchers and authors in this and all the editions of this journal contribute to that knowledge development and sharing of expertise.

Mark Avery
Editor-in-Chief