Healthcare innovation

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The world of healthcare management is currently dominated by the need to improve performance and modernise services, particularly public services. In times of fiscal restraint managers are expected to do more with less and think creatively about how this may be achieved. The traditional boundaries between different forms of healthcare are blurring as advances in medicine and the role of individuals in managing their own health fundamental changes expectations. Into this arena there has been a building imperative which is centered on the need to innovate, for systems and the individuals within them. Innovation is the process of putting something new into practice but unlike invention the newness comes from copying an approach used elsewhere or changing the context of how an idea has been applied. As noted in a recent comprehensive OECD review on innovation in public service delivery, innovation is about people and culture at least as much as it is about delivering new products, systems and technologies.¹ To be successful and sustainable it will require behaviours in the health system to change, including those of the key actors.² Evidence from the fields of knowledge transfer and diffusion of innovation suggests that it takes a range of purposeful actions to innovate including supportive management.³

Therein lies the challenge. Understanding innovation, how and why particular actions have a particular impact has been much debated but less attention has been given to understanding the practicalities of innovation for individual leaders, managers, researchers. Indeed as noted by Tilford⁴ ‘European electorates want the benefits of innovation-cheaper better products but not the disruption and insecurity that come with it’ (p. 72).

Innovation can be unpredictable and indeed harmful so perhaps it should come as no surprise that it can produce real resistance and much needed innovations which can improve healthcare outcomes have been slow to be adopted or been unsustainable. The implementation rates of quality improvement initiatives have been assessed at less than 50%.⁵ There have also been real concerns that key actors in the system are consistently overlooked,⁶ for example middle managers are critical to innovation implementation yet much research has not evaluated this aspect of innovation and studies have tended to focus exclusively on physician or top management behavior. The voice of patients and carers is also largely absent in the field. Innovators wherever they are tend to ask questions in challenging and possibly provocative ways the response they get is frequently unpredictable.

Innovation is a very attractive behavior because currently it is highly prized but innovating successfully is not easy. It requires employees who are well lead and a management system that supports innovation. Stories about successful innovation often describe grand schemes and quantum leaps, the reality as documented by many commentators from the field is that innovation is more likely to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary and requires a whole system understanding, attention to all actors in the innovation ecosystem.²

In this special issue the editorial team has sought to present a theory of innovation which actively considers the dynamic between health professionals and health managers. We have also through a series of papers tried to present a more considered and focused view of the healthcare innovation landscape. In doing this we have also been able to demonstrate to health researchers that there remain some very fertile areas for future empirical research.

The International Journal of Healthcare Management assumes its social role of supporting the process of dissemination of knowledge and capacity building amongst the international community of healthcare managers.

This special issue is focused on promoting an international overview of innovation in healthcare.
From conceptual innovative developments, through to discussing the most important articles on innovation in healthcare, the articles produced especially for this issue will help our international audiences to get a wide perspective of what are the most relevant aspects of the knowledge development around the associated topics. Additionally, because it is fundamental to transfer scientific and conceptual knowledge to practice, this special issue also includes articles on practical applications of the thinking around innovation in healthcare. This special issue of the *International Journal of Healthcare Management* is therefore a contribution to healthcare and policy development on what concerns the process of tackling the diversity of innovation in healthcare and its challenges for healthcare systems and organizations.

**References**

6. As above.
7. As 2.