McMaster University

McMaster HEALTH FORUM

Integrating Data Across Sectors for Public Service Improvement in Ontario

Topic Overview
Citizen panels
23 January, 27 February, and 5 March 2016

The McMaster Health Forum convened three citizen panels on the subject of integrating data across sectors for public service improvement in Ontario. The panels were organized with the support of the Government of Ontario (through a Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care Health System Research Fund grant entitled Harnessing Evidence and Values for Health System Excellence), and brought together 40 citizens from across the regions covered by the Hamilton Niagara Haldimand Brant Local Health Integration Network, Champlain Local Health Integration Network and the North East Local Health Integration Network to examine the problem, options for addressing it, and key implementation considerations. The purpose of the panels was to guide the efforts of policymakers, managers and professional leaders who make decisions about our health system.

Discussing the problem

Participants first noted it was important to consider that data integration could be used both to provide comprehensive aggregate data for research, policymaking and planning related to public service improvement, as well as to ensure each individual's data can be integrated and accessible across service settings to enable person-centred services. Six challenges for integrating data across sectors in Ontario were identified by participants as the most pressing: 1) Ontario lacks a clear data integration vision, and there is limited public 'buy in' for data integration; 2) there is a lack of transparency with respect to how person-level data are used in Ontario; 3) some citizens lack confidence in the government and the broader public sector; 4) there are many inefficiencies in existing systems for collecting, managing and using person-level data; 5) the rapid pace of technological change creates additional challenges for data integration; and 6) political factors reduce opportunities for data integration.

Ontario

Forty citizens gathered for a series of three events hosted by the McMaster Health Forum in Hamilton (23 January), Ottawa (27 February) and Sudbury (5 March). Participants, who attended their local event, came from across the regions covered by the Hamilton Niagara Haldimand Brant Local Health Integration Network, Champlain Local Health Integration Network and the North East Local Health Integration Network.

Discussing the options

As part of the deliberations about the elements of a potentially comprehensive approach, participants indicated that an element '0' should be pursued before element 1 – the development of a long-term vision for data integration in Ontario. This was discussed with emphasis on the values-related themes of transparency, accountability and trust. Participants generally supported all of the elements, with the majority indicating that element 1 was important and that action in this area should be taken as soon as possible, and many agreeing that a 4th element – rigorous monitoring and evaluation – should also be added to the approach. The values-related themes of public engagement, patient-centredness, transparency, accountability, trust, efficiency and flexibility/adaptability underpinned discussions related to the elements.

Discussing the implementation considerations

Six sets of barriers were identified to moving forward: 1) the costs associated with such a 'big ticket' approach, its technical complexity, and a perceived lack of expertise in government; 2) the likelihood of the initiative being sustained as governments change; 3) a general mistrust towards government; 4) a lack of existing 'buy in' for data integration from the public; 5) a resistance to changing current data integration approaches among some members of the public; and 6) a concern that currently nothing is being done and we might miss an opportunity for improvement with respect to data integration. However, two facilitators supporting change were also identified: 1) things are already beginning to change; and 2) the public has the ability to understand the benefits of data integration if done well.

Panel deliverables

To learn more about this topic, consult the citizen brief that was presented to participants before the panel and the summary of the panel. For an electronic copy of the citizen brief or panel summary, visit our website www.mcmasterhealthforum.com and click on 'Products' along the sidebar.

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