Creating Collaborative and Resilient Healthcare Systems: Insights from Robin Gauld

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Professor Robin Gauld speaking at CHI 18th Masterclass

The Centre for Healthcare Innovation (CHI)'s 18th Masterclass, "Policy to Practice: Lessons from New Zealand's population healthcare system for Singapore", was presented by Professor Robin Gauld, Co-Director of the Centre for Health Systems and Technology, Professor at Dunedin School of Medicine and University of Otago, and Founding Independent Chair of Alliance Health. An expert in health policy and implementation, Professor Gauld shared strategies for transforming healthcare systems through the lens of policy and management.

Central to his sharing was a fundamental yet pressing question: **In the face of rising costs, ageing populations, and complex health needs, how can healthcare systems evolve to deliver better care outcomes?**

Agenda Setting: The Art of Making Issues Matter

In today's rapidly ageing population, we must continually reassess our healthcare policies to prepare for the future. However, in the complex landscape of healthcare, numerous issues vie for attention, where only some make it to the policy agenda. The concept of a 'policy window' (Kingdon, 1984) becomes necessary therefore to identify and leverage on the opportune moment when three essential streams align: Problems, Policies, Politics.

Kingdon's Model (1984)
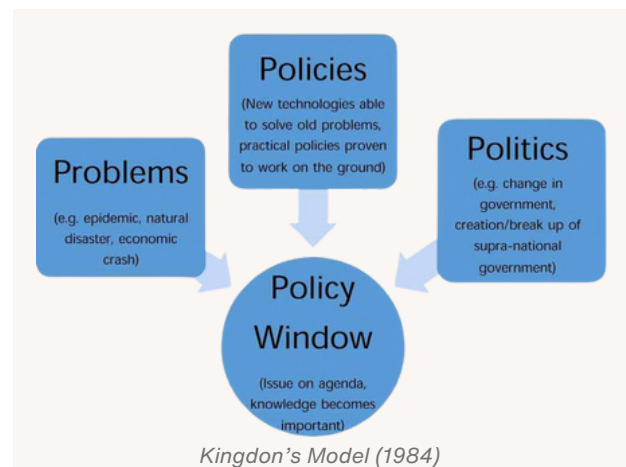
1. Spotlighting the Problem
Robust research on the problem is essential, but it is only half the battle. The other half requires presenting the data and articulating the need in a way that demands attention and action. A good example is Singapore's narrative of urgency that expounds the fact that by 2030, 1 in 4 Singaporeans will be 65 or older - a dramatic leap from just 1 in 31 in 1970, thereby projecting an enormous strain on the economy and on our overall quality of life.

2. Defining Actionable Policies
Policies for change need to come with viable solutions. Evidence-based solutions with clear models of delivery can be articulated in the implementation of policy. However, the success of these solutions will depend on their feasibility and adaptability to real-world implementation.

3. Obtaining Political Support
A final, crucial ingredient in agenda setting is political will. For policy to gain acceptance, it must receive recognition and support, evidenced by strong partnerships among a coalition of policymakers, senior leaders, middle managers, clinical leaders, and also public support.

Implementation and Evaluation: The Real Challenge

The path from paper to practice is fraught with challenges, from misaligned personnel and resource constraints to operational hurdles and resistance to change. In times like this, even the most well-intentioned policies may fail to create meaningful change.

> *Policy is 5% idea and 95% implementation.*
> *-Robin Gauld*

He therefore submitted three strategies for consideration:

1. Build Health Alliances that Foster Collaboration for Better Care

There is transformative potential in health alliances – defined as partnerships that unite primary care providers, public hospitals and social services under a unified goal of improving patient outcomes. New Zealand's Alliance South exemplifies this, uniting primary care providers, public hospitals, social services under a common understanding of pooling resources and reducing duplication. Where decision-making is focused on what is best for the patient and for the system, this can effectively align everyone and help address barriers to policy implementation.

Alliance South Structure by Professor Robin Gauld

In view of an ageing population and increased demand for healthcare services in Singapore, health alliances can reduce fragmentation of services and ensure more efficient resource allocation. Singapore could adopt a phased approach towards building alliances, beginning with primary and secondary care. Over time, the alliance could bridge across public healthcare clusters and sectors, forming a network that "works collaboratively while maintaining independence". Such alliances would ensure that healthcare, social and community services reach the right populations at the right time.

Professor Gauld quotes James C. Collins:

> *Get the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats".*

2. Empower Healthcare Practitioners to Lead Change through Clinical Governance & Leadership

"Everyone in this health organisation has two jobs: providing care, as well as improving the systems for providing care."
Healthcare practitioners, who "know what's best for the system", play a critical role in transforming the healthcare systems, beyond their primary roles as physicians, nurses, or allied health professionals. Across Singapore's public healthcare clusters, healthcare professionals are increasingly taking on leadership alongside clinical roles. This dual responsibility encourages distributed leadership among healthcare professionals at all levels to take ownership of system improvements while working closely with management to ensure good clinical governance.

"Effective clinical governance requires genuine, robust management-clinical partnerships, a multi-layered developmental strategy, and investment in training for clinical governance."

By promoting distributed leadership in clinical teams, healthcare systems can empower frontline professionals to lead change at the ground level. As they are the most in touch with what is happening on the ground and most closely connected to ground staff, they can ensure that policies are developed and implemented in ways that can better meet the needs of the communities they serve. They are also able to foster a stronger commitment among the healthcare staff, rallying them to actively support and engage with these initiatives.

3. Patient-led innovation: Catalysing Change from Ground-up

*Dana Lewis, patient, creator and founder of OpenAPS.
Image source: Forbes, 2017.*

> *Patients are sometimes the most important innovators or entrepreneurs in healthcare. If you really want to achieve change, investing in patients with innovation and entrepreneurship can be extremely valuable.*

Patients, often overlooked as potential innovators, could be a critical source of entrepreneurial ideas that drive meaningful change. They bring a unique perspective - the lived experience of navigating health challenges. This insider view can spark ideas that professionals might never conceive, leading to solutions that truly resonate with patient needs and realities, thereby garnering their support during implementation. For instance, by combining a continuous blood glucose monitor, an insulin pump and a computerised control system, a Type 1 Diabetes patient developed an 'artificial pancreas' – the first commercial assistive device for diabetes, exemplifying the transformative potential of patient-led innovation.

Centre for Health Activation (CHA)

The Centre for Health Activation (CHA) at CHI collaborated with Tan Tock Seng Hospital's clinical and operations teams as well as the Colorectal Cancer Patient Support Group to co-develop a Patient Education (PE) corner - a space where patient ideas can flourish and potentially transform into solutions for the future. By weaving in patient voices into the development of PE resources and services, we can now collectively build person centred solutions to support future patients.

Moving Forward: Building a Resilient Healthcare Future

Professor Robin Gauld's insights highlight the power of collaboration, integration and patient empowerment in shaping resilient healthcare systems. Health alliances offer Singapore a pathway to bridge divisions across clusters, secondary care and social services, fostering a cohesive, patient-centred approach. Equally, empowering healthcare professionals and patients ensures care delivery and solutions reflect real needs, driving meaningful change.

What stands out is the reminder that healthcare transformation is a long and iterative process. Healthcare systems worldwide, including New Zealand's, have undergone multiple reforms, often taking years to achieve meaningful integration and improvement. As Singapore begins a new chapter of healthcare reform through HealthierSG, the lessons from this Masterclass remind us of the importance of shared accountability and sustained effort. By working together and embracing change at all levels, we can build a healthcare system that anticipates and meets the needs of tomorrow.

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