

The Transparency Movement:

Openness in Comparing and Evaluating the Outcomes of Health Management Programs

By Thomas Wilson, PhD, DrPH

“Recently, we’ve seen creeping into measurement of work-site-based health and productivity programs the use of non-validated, non-peer reviewed, proprietary, and poorly described evaluation models and metrics.” IHPM asked Dr. Thomas Wilson to comment on this development.

Throughout history, the care of the sick has been a dynamic between miracle, mystery and secrecy on the one hand; and reason, science and transparency on the other. Advances in health care are the product of these two forces.

The famous Sidney Harris cartoon seen here exemplifies the two forces. In the middle of a complex mathematical equation on the black board appear the words, “... then a miracle occurs.” A peer-reviewer points to the scribbled phrase and states to the inventor of the equation, “I think you should be more explicit here in step two.” This remark gets a lot of laughs from scientists, a community ruled, more or less, by the “Principle of Transparency.”

It is not funny to everyone, however. I showed this to an entrepreneur who assumed the term “miracle” was for marketing purposes only (as in Miracle Gro™), and encouraged the scientist who created the complex formula to keep his “secret sauce” legally protected. He is obviously from a different community than the scientists, one that operates, to whatever extent deemed necessary, on the “Principle of Opacity” as a justifiable way to protect economic self-interest.

Opacity, or non-disclosure (for example, via trade secret laws), is often an essential step to advance innovations, including those in the “healing industry.” Many medicines, for example, which are effective today, were originally “secret potions.”

The key word here is *effective*. Testing effectiveness is quite different from inventing and marketing a “secret potion.” Health services and products must be delivered, and their impacts evaluated, openly and credibly.

Users of these services and products must be able to trust that the techniques used to determine their safety and effectiveness are not only valid and credible, but replicable by independent parties. Disclosure of those techniques is essential for the public to trust the claims made by the producers and promoters of healing products and services.

“Transparency” must, therefore, be the operative principle when

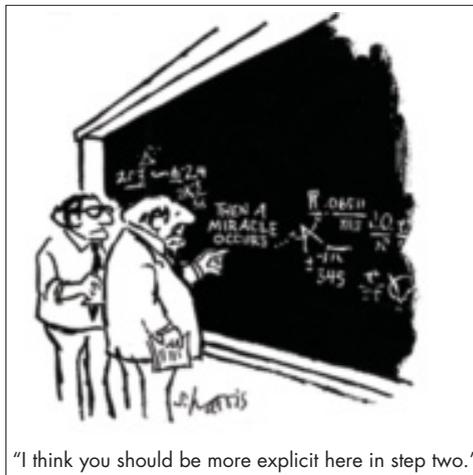
testing the effectiveness of these products and services. In this context, transparency is defined as “minimal disclosure of methods and metrics necessary to replicate any impact assessment” (see: <http://www.phiinstitute.org/ethics.html>). This disclosure can occur in the public domain, or with the legal protections of patents or copyrights designed to protect legitimate economic interests while at the same time making the content available for public and scientific scrutiny.

The Population Health Impact Institute (PHI Institute) was established to help buyers and sellers of population health management products and services to work together openly to compare results of different interventions, using methods of evaluation that are transparent and independently verifiable. A goal of the newly formed Institute is to advocate for a “Transparency Movement” of like-minded stakeholders who will use scientifically sound, openly verifiable, and, thereby, trustworthy impact assessments of interventions to improve the health of defined populations.

I do not discount the potential role of “miracles” in healing – both true mysteries and trade secrets. Mysteries and trade secrets have no place, however, in assessing the impact of healing interventions, where the need to compare and evaluate openly and credibly must be the supreme rule.

Note: The mission of the Population Health Impact (PHI) Institute is to “promote and provide independent evaluations of defined population health management programs through impact studies, education, research, and benchmarking services for both public and private sector organizations” (www.PHIinstitute.org). IHPM has endorsed the PHI Institute’s Code of Evaluation Ethics and its Five Evaluation Principles. [IHPM](#)

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