

Preface

Patient empowerment is a hot topic in healthcare management and public health, which is attracting the growing interest of scholars and practitioners. However, there is still little agreement on what is meant by patient empowerment. Moreover, little is known about the distinguishing attributes and the consequences of patient empowerment interventions. Drawing on these considerations, this brief aims at pushing forward the knowledge in the field of patient empowerment, in an attempt to fill the current gaps in the scientific literature. For these purposes, it discusses the positive role of patient empowerment in shaping the healthcare service system of the future; besides, it investigates the “dark side” of patient empowerment, examining the risks of value co-destruction which could be attached to the engagement of patients in the delivery of care.

As compared with the existing literature, this brief strives for providing the reader with a full-fledged understanding of the patient empowerment concept. On the one hand, patient empowerment is depicted as a paradigm shift from the traditional bio-medical/industrial model of care toward a patient-centered approach, which is largely consistent with the contents of the healthcare reforms of most of Western countries. On the other hand, the side effects of patient empowerment are dealt with, emphasizing that patient involvement in the design and delivery of care may result in the misuse of available resources. This is especially true when the patients and the healthcare professionals bring contrasting expectations, conflicting inputs and diverging ends in the healthcare environment, paving the way for value co-destruction.

Rather than focusing on the implementation issues of patient empowerment in a specific healthcare setting—such as primary care or hospital care—this book conceives patient empowerment as a mainstream strategy, which is able to deeply affect the future shapes of the healthcare service system. Notwithstanding, this brief is not biased by an excessively optimistic interpretation of patient empowerment. As anticipated, it delves into both the bright and the dark sides of patient empowerment, in order to identify the key ingredients which should be included in the recipe for effective patient empowerment. From this point of view, this book is not targeted to a specific audience. Rather, it is addressed to the general public of

students, scholars and practitioners who are interested in healthcare management and public health. Among others, health policy makers, senior managers of healthcare organizations and healthcare professionals may benefit from reading this brief.

The book is organized in four chapters, which are strictly intertwined. Chapter 1 introduces the main topic of the volume. In particular, it provides the reader with a contextualization of patient empowerment, pointing out the key attributes which build this construct. The roots of the patient empowerment concept are outlined. Moreover, the different perspectives suggested by the scientific literature to deal with this construct are investigated, in an attempt to devise an overarching definition of patient empowerment. In light of this conceptual framework, the requisites to patient empowerment interventions are discussed, embracing a relational interpretation. In fact, the effective implementation of patient empowerment initiatives does not solely rely on the enablement of patients; rather, it requires the enhancement of the healthcare organizations' ability to establish a friendly and co-creating relationship with the patients.

Chapter 2 delves into the bright side of patient empowerment. First of all, it builds a conceptual link between patient empowerment and value co-creation. Empowered patients are considered to be more willing to participate in health decision making and to establish a co-creating partnership with the providers of care. In other words, patient empowerment reframes the patient-provider relationship, identifying the former as an active agent rather than as a sheer consumer of health services. Therefore, patient empowerment is argued to be an antecedent of health services' co-production. Actually, empowered patients are more willing to be involved in the design and delivery of care, thus performing as service co-producers. Patient involvement allows a better distribution of responsibilities between the patients and the providers of care, reducing the inappropriate access to care and enhancing health outcomes. Hence, patient empowerment initiatives may pave the way for lower healthcare costs and increased sustainability of the healthcare service system.

Chapter 3 discusses the dark side of patient empowerment. Drawing from the most recent conceptual developments in the fields of service science and healthcare management, patient empowerment is claimed to be not enough to realize patient engagement. In fact, patient empowerment does not necessarily produce the involvement of the patient in the provision of care, if it is not associated with a process of patient enablement. Empowered patients who are not able or unwilling to actively participate in the design and delivery of care are at risk of co-destroying value. Sticking to these considerations, a need for enlightening the dark side of patient empowerment is argued, in an attempt to devise and implement appropriate strategies intended to overcome the barriers to value co-creation in the healthcare service system.

The concluding Chap. 4 points out the role of health literacy in empowering patients. Health literacy is presented as a multifaceted concept, which shows an individual and an organizational shade. On the one hand, individual health literacy concerns the patients' ability to access, understand, process and use health

information, in order to navigate the healthcare environment properly. On the other hand, organizational health literacy involves the capacity of the healthcare organizations to establish a clear and comfortable setting, which fosters the willingness of the patients and the healthcare professionals to build a co-creating partnership. Both individual and organizational health literacy are considered to be fundamental ingredients of the recipe for effective patient empowerment interventions.

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