

## Management of Health Services: Importance of Epidemiology in the Year 2000 and Beyond

Haroutune K. Armenian<sup>1</sup> and Donald M. Steinwachs<sup>2</sup>

In the last half of the 20th century, remarkable growth occurred in the preventive, diagnostic, treatment, and rehabilitative technologies shown to be efficacious in preventing and treating disease and injury. Management of health care services has become increasingly complex as the scientific basis of health care has grown. Complexity also arises from the multiplicity of decision makers involved in health services (1). Decisions about whether to seek preventive or symptomatic care generally are made by individual persons; the health care provider makes choices about diagnostic, treatment, and rehabilitative options; and, ultimately, the patient is expected to accept the provider's recommendations and to adhere to the prescribed regimen.

In the broader context of health care systems, managers must make budget and staffing decisions that affect availability and access to services. Public and private purchasers have become a primary force in cost containment because of their decisions on the scope of coverage provided to their constituencies. Similarly, health insurers have to decide what services are covered, how much to pay for the services, and how much patients will pay out-of-pocket. Also, health insurers increasingly are being held accountable for the quality of care provided to their enrolled populations. These decisions affect access to services and the financial burden of health care on the family.

In a perfect world, all decision makers would have access to complete information and could use this information to make "best" choices for themselves, their patients, and their communities. A central role for epidemiology in health services management is to provide the information needed by patients, providers, managers, insurers, regulators, and policy makers. A major challenge is to provide the information so it can

be used by all decision makers, from the highly sophisticated to those with a more limited understanding of health care.

This review highlights the role of epidemiology within the framework of decision making regarding management and delivery of health services. In addition, it projects some future options for integrating epidemiology into health services management.

### EPIDEMIOLOGY FOR HEALTH CARE EVALUATION: LEARNING WHAT WORKS

#### An information science

Epidemiology is an information science. Through a variety of approaches, epidemiology generates information for decision making by health professionals working at all levels of the health care system. (2). This information is relevant to persons and communities, to health care managers, and to policy makers. Although these three groups are exposed to different reports about epidemiologic research findings, they are less likely to read epidemiology and other science journals. Similarly, these groups are less likely to be exposed to and to understand the structured approach to making inferences and decisions, which is the foundation of epidemiology. In particular, epidemiology focuses attention on the population and those at risk. These concepts are central to the growing emphasis on population-based medicine that addresses individual and community health care needs.

Until recently, epidemiology was used primarily to investigate problems. Epidemiologic investigation focused on identifying an etiologic process for use in both acute and chronic problem-solving situations and on evaluating interventions and programs. This process of problem investigation provides a discipline of operation and thought to epidemiologists that transcends the specifics of the various health problems they deal with. This discipline is the result of effective health care problem solving for over 150 years. Could such a discipline provide useful principles for health care management?

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Epidemiology, School of Hygiene and Public Health, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Health Policy and Management, School of Hygiene and Public Health, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.

# Epidemiology In Health Services Management

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