The Learning Health System. Most of you have likely heard of this concept by now. It was first introduced by the Institute of Medicine in 2007. Since then, there has been growing traction around the Learning Health System, with a dedicated journal with the same name, academic departments that focus on training researchers and practitioners that can study and apply the principles of the Learning Health System, and grant funding support to investigate questions about how to build and sustain a Learning Health System. So what is it?

A Learning Health System is formally defined as one in which “science, informatics, incentives, and culture are aligned for continuous improvement and innovation, with best practices seamlessly embedded in the care process, patients and families active participants in all elements, and new knowledge captured as an integral by-product of the care experience” (Institute of Medicine, 2013, p. 136). More concisely described, a Learning Health System is an organization or network that continuously evaluates and adapts practices using data and analytics to generate knowledge, engage stakeholders and implement behavior change by and among its members (University of Michigan Department of Learning Health Sciences). If you have been hanging around health care long enough, some of the ideas embedded in these definitions likely sound familiar. Old wine in a new bottle? Maybe. Maybe not. Does it matter?

Regardless of your stance on these questions, we can probably all agree that there is much to learn (no pun intended!) about how to create a Learning Health System and we, as management scholars, have much to contribute. Questions of culture, quality improvement, innovation adoption and implementation, coordination, cultivating a motivated and engaged workforce capable of change; these are all topics that have long been the purview of health care management researchers. The importance of leadership looms large in the Learning Health System, even if not explicitly stated in its definition. Even the foundational question of whether and how organizations learn is one that management scholars have grappled with for a long time.

Please do not misinterpret the message here - this is not a call for disciplinary territorialism. The Learning Health System as a concept is too multifaceted and nuanced to think that any single discipline can lay claim to studying and implementing it. Moreover, the Learning Health System will require researchers and practitioners to work together in ways that thus far have remained elusive to all but a few. New models of collaboration will likely be needed to overcome these longstanding divides. But one of the strengths of health care – both in terms of research and practice - is its recognition of how much can be accomplished when diverse disciplines and professionals work together. Health care management scholars have much to contribute to these conversations. We look forward to seeing your own work that can help us unleash the potential of the Learning Health System.

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