

Human action as a determinant for the effectiveness of treatment in healthcare

This edition deals with a fundamental topic for health services and care, namely **the 'soft technologies'**. From a systematic standpoint, technologies are targeted human actions: tools and resources developed by societies to resolve their problems and promote welfare, though they can also be used to oppress or dominate. Being human creations, these technologies assume the direction and orientation that the individuals and societies give them. In both the positive and negative sense, there are the so-called 'hard' technologies that correspond to products, materials, artifacts and instruments; and the so-called 'soft technologies' that can be defined as practices involving relations, communication, promotion, support, management and evaluation that are discussed, tried and assessed, incorporating experiences and advances in scientific knowledge in the social and human sciences.

In any society, the scientific and technological systems – taken as a whole – form an extensive network of material, cultural and symbolic objects. In the case of the health sector, heavily inundated with chemical and biological machinery and products, the soft technologies are especially fundamental in two senses: (1) to mediate artifacts of all kinds which stand between the healthcare professional and the patient in a humane way, and (2) to make healthcare more efficient, efficacious and effective.

Although for handling of equipment and products and the care given by professionals, the logic of the system requires the presence of technically qualified people, the incorporation of soft technologies and enhancement thereof are undervalued in comparison with the value attributed to machines. The lack of attention given to soft technologies is due to the accumulation of added value – which is nothing more than objective human labor subsumed in the goods – in the medical-hospital complex: this is one of the most dynamic economic sectors worldwide. Its imposing presence and ability to generate wealth blind both the system and society per se with respect to the indisputable and indispensable role of human and relationship participation in healthcare dissemination. Indeed, best practices are always demanded, especially by the population, but they are generally represented as an attribute of a more or less sensitive individual, and far less as a field for technological development.

In this thematic issue, it is understood that soft technologies, albeit less visible, are essential for the management of artifacts and products and for going far beyond what machines can do. Therefore, it is argued that one should never consider the sphere of mechanical, electronic, chemical and biological technologies separately from those which ensure the effectiveness of planning, management, doctor-patient relations, reception and evaluation, among others.

Readers will find various approaches to the topic in question in this issue. In addition to the debate article written by Gastão Wagner, which addresses the importance and significance of soft technologies in healthcare, there are several research texts that show the advances in methods and techniques that can contribute to improving the unified health system in Brazil: studies on the control of hospital infection; presentation and validation of measurement instruments and scales; technologies in mental healthcare; development of quantitative and qualitative indicators; care for the security of foodstuffs; interdisciplinary interventions to tackle various diseases and the promotion of healthcare; tools to identify vulnerabilities, quality of life and for assessment.

Lastly, it is understood that the issue of 'soft technologies' converges on the same focus of humanization, a concept that has informed and enhanced the outlook on healthcare in Brazil in recent years.

Maria Cecília de Souza Minayo

Editor-in-Chief of Revista Ciência & Saúde Coletiva