

Efficiency and public policy of the Portuguese healthcare sector: a look at the pressing issues

Summary

Accessing healthcare services with a minimum level of quality is a fundamental human right. For this reason, structures of people, institutions, and resources were created to deliver those services and meet the population's needs. Regardless of their founding philosophy, which varies from country to country, operating health systems requires not only the management of significant resources, but also key information for the sake of decision- and policy-making. Naturally, obstacles to governance, resource management, and financing are a reality behind their already complex nature. In Portugal, this scenario is not different. Comprising a network of primary, secondary, and tertiary providers, the country's National Health Service (SNS, from the Portuguese abbreviation of Serviço Nacional de Saúde) delivers health services to more than ten million users following a Beveridgian philosophy. However, demographic changes, technological progress, and a financial crisis affected the sector in the last decade, leading to an increase in health expenditure - not necessarily associated with an increase in the access to and quality of health services. In fact, public hospitals, as primary resource consumers, have been endangering the SNS's sustainability.

With the proposal of several reforms in recent years, there has been an effort to counterbalance this trend, despite the criticism. Therefore, if public hospitals were efficient, a considerable share of resources could be saved and the sustainability of the SNS could be ensured. For this reason, searching for inefficiencies, deriving policy implications, and proposing the implementation of "best practices", resting on solid scientific foundations, must be pursued. Indeed, this work proposes the use of mathematical models to address HEALTH POLICY AND PLANNING, PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT, and HEALTH ECONOMICS issues regarding the Portuguese public hospitals and, ultimately, THE "BIGGER PICTURE" of the SNS, based on the principles of operational research and management science. In particular, the design of state-of-the-art models based on data envelopment analysis and multi-criteria decision analysis overcomes most drawbacks of classical models and enables the study of those institutions taking into account a number of distinct factors, such as their internal structures, the incorporation of preference information of decision-makers, the perspectives of the SNS's users and providers, and criteria interactivity. In the end, on the one hand, the main conclusions point to the deficiencies in the proposal selection process behind public-private partnership hospitals, the differences in performance when looking at the hospitals from the standpoint of the SNS's users or providers, and the lower efficiencies of those institutions when considering the internal structure; on the other hand, the mid-table position of the SNS in a ranking of European Beveridgian health systems contrasts with the fact that Portugal is seen as a global innovator in terms of "ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being for all at all ages" when pursuing a sustainable development. These conclusions suggest that the adoption of benchmarking framework in the SNS aimed at evaluating its public hospitals is called for in order to identify target performers and "best practices", with the intention that decisions and policies are made standing on credible information.

Keywords

Health systems, hospital and hospital services, efficiency, health policy, Portugal.



Adapted BCG matrix of the users' perspective vs. the providers' perspective.



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