Chapter XLVIII
The Role of IT in Global Health Disparities and Human Rights

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ABSTRACT

In a global environment, a key challenge of health care and information technology (IT) management involves increasing the knowledge of human rights issues and addressing the health disparities that result when human rights are violated. This chapter aims to promote the awareness and protection of basic human rights as a 21st century imperative. Drawing upon the human rights conceptual framework, the chapter focuses on the following objectives: First, the chapter highlights direct and indirect linkages between health and human rights, with an introduction to the principles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other health-related human rights documents. Second, the relevance of the globalization and the human rights framework for health care and IT management will be discussed. Third, the chapter presents initiatives in IT management solutions and policies with promising potential to enhance the health care and human rights situations of people around the world.

INTRODUCTION

Increased globalization made possible by technological advances has generated growing interdependence across national boundaries. Innovations such as electronic medical records, modern diseases such as SARS and avian flu, and international exchanges through trade and travel have extended both opportunities and threats to health, security, and well-being. It has become necessary to be concerned, not only with the immediate effect of clinical practices and health policy decisions, but also with the repercussions when people and nations lack resources to provide adequate health interventions. In this global environment, an important challenge of health care and information technology (IT) management involves bolstering efforts to protect human rights, as well as dealing with the health disparities arising from human rights violations.

In this chapter, the primary aim is to raise awareness and emphasize the protection of basic human rights as a 21st century priority. Using the human rights conceptual framework, the chapter discusses the following: 1) direct and indirect linkages between health and human rights, with an introduction to the principles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other health-related human rights documents; 2) the relevance of the globalization and the human rights framework to health care and information technology management; and 3) innovations in IT management solutions and policies that would improve global health care and human rights conditions.

Educational and experiential exposure to human rights principles will provide the skills to guide health professionals in using the human rights framework to advocate for the people within the communities they serve and enhance the quality of the care provided in the organizations they manage. Ideally, the design of the human rights educational experience would include multiple goals of developing an expanded world view, understanding content, and acquiring practical skills. Awareness of the broad social and economic context on the international and domestic fronts is vital for the comprehension of the scope and limitations of the human rights framework. Historically, health practitioners in general and health care managers in particular have not been exposed to human rights concepts. As such, the time for introducing human rights education into health care management is sooner rather than later. Drawing upon their human rights education experiences, health managers can apply core values and concerns about human dignity, equity, fairness, and justice. Additionally, ongoing human rights violations, whether economic, social, cultural, civil, or political exert significant effects on the well-being, morbidity, and mortality of populations that health care professionals worldwide serve. Moreover, while the twentieth century produced a myriad of technological advances at an accelerating rate, age-old social problems such as poverty, hunger, illiteracy, and preventable disease continue to affect the health of many people.

THE RIGHT TO HEALTH

From an international scope, initial recognition of the right to health may be found in the United Nations Charter document (1945) and was elaborated further in the preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization (1946), with its assertion that: "The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition." At the foundation of the global human rights movement is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted by the United Nations in 1948. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights attests for all humanity the "right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control" (UDHR, Article 25). Human rights are universal by virtue of their equal applicability to all people because of their humanity. As human beings, people are considered to be entitled to particular inalienable rights that are recognized by moral principles and affirmed by the laws of an organized society.

Direct offshoots of the UDHR were two additional documents that were adopted in 1966: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Together these three documents (the Universal Declaration and the two International Covenants) are known as the International Bill of Human Rights. Basic human rights delineated

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