Citizen Engagement: One Route to More Accountable Health Care

Friday, April 16, 2004 – Citizen engagement has an important role to play in current efforts to improve accountability in the health care system.

That's one conclusion of the second of the Health Care Accountability Papers from CPRN's Health Network. ***Engaging Citizens: One Route to Health Care Accountability***, by Julia Abelson and François-Pierre Gauvin, reviews the experience with citizen engagement in Canada and abroad and assesses its value in improving accountability in health care decision making.

"We find that governments are developing mechanisms to improve accountability," says Abelson. "But they are doing so largely in the absence of guiding principles, or a strong research base, and with no criteria for assessing whether greater accountability has, in fact, been achieved."

The authors stress that citizen engagement is a new and more demanding form of public involvement. It requires greater emphasis on information, power sharing, and reciprocity between citizens and their governors. Its pay-off is a greater level of trust between citizens and decision makers.

"The relationship is also more complex than traditionally thought," says Abelson. "Instead of a unidirectional relationship, with governments being accountable to citizens, we see the relationship as being interactive and two-way."

This perspective fits well with the notion that citizenship involves both rights and responsibilities. Seen this way, accountability is both vertical (citizen/government) and horizontal (citizen/citizen).

Abelson and Gauvin identify three dimensions against which to assess the impact and validity of a citizen engagement initiative on accountability:

- *Sanction* – the presence of legal or regulatory requirements and penalties, incentives, professional codes, potential for public exposure or publicity, etc.
- *Answerability* – the obligation to answer questions about decisions or actions, in advance or after the fact, and to provide adequate information to make those questions effective.
- *Relationship-building* – whether it contributes, often through governance arrangements, to developing relationships of trust, openness and responsiveness between citizens and government, or public, institutions.

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“Because we see citizen engagement as a desirable long-term mechanism for accountability, we regard relationship-building as the primary test of success in this respect,” Abelson says. “Answerability is clearly important too, while sanction only really comes into play where the other two fail.”

The authors conclude that citizen engagement is far from being institutionalized as a means for fostering democratic accountability in Canada. This is so, they argue, because citizen engagement challenges long-standing power relations in health care decision making as well as traditional relations between governed and governors.

“Citizen engagement demands considerable resources in the form of nurturing political institutions, cultural receptivity, a strong civic infrastructure, access to information and a strong role for the media,” says Abelson.

“In the end, entrenching citizen engagement as part of our accountability practice will depend on a significant political commitment in response to what Canadians have clearly said they want.”

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