THE POLICY EFFECTIVENESS
OF HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCH:
A RECONSIDERATION

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ABSTRACT: It has often been asserted that health services research (HSR) has been either epiphenomenal or entirely ineffectual in influencing the formation of policy. In this examination of the HSR-policy relationship that assertion is contested; the authors conclude that there has been a relationship between HSR and policy, at least public policy. A diagrammatic framework is presented to describe the HSR-policy nexus in an attempt to facilitate an understanding of how future efforts in the conduct of HSR might be most effective.

Whatever the status of health services research (HSR), the amount of literature on that subject now amounts to almost an embarrassment of riches. (To mention only a few of the efforts in this area: the Health Services Research Study Project was commissioned in the mid-1960s by the Health Services Research Study Section of the United States Public Health Service. It published a collection of essays even before there was much agreement on what HSR meant. 1 Flook and Sanazaro edited Health Services Research and R & D in Perspective, which contained virtually exhaustive bibliographic essays on the field as it then was. 2 At least three journals devoted all, or substantial proportions, of one of their issues to examining the nature of health services research and the reflections of interested spectators on the subject and its merits and deficiencies.) 3-4-5 A pervasive theme is the relationship between HSR and policy. Such concern about the efficacy of HSR with respect to policy formation is understandable, considering that “the field is purposive in its orientation, even normative, and strongly ‘applied’ in the sense that its ultimate goal is the improvement of health care and health”. 6 An HSR-policy relationship, then, is a necessary, if clearly insufficient, condition for the realization of the ultimate goals of HSR.

The verdict of the majority seems to be that HSR either has been entirely ineffectual in affecting policy or it has been epiphenomenal, i.e., the conditions that have called for research in a given area have also preordained the general nature of the policy adopted to deal with them. This paper takes issue with most of this literature and contends that there has been a relationship, perhaps not an easily traceable one, between health services research and policy, at least public policy, regardless of its intended effects on health outcomes.

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Our argument derives from several premises and questions the validity of some prevailing opinions. First, the information used to argue that HSR is a relatively insignificant factor in the policy process is suspect in some ways. For one thing, the literature has relied upon statements of researchers’ frustrations that may be exaggerated by the heroic expectations they have had, expectations that are not unique to HSR. For another, the argument may stem from decision makers’ laments about the climate of uncertainty in which they must operate. As with researchers’ frustrations, decision makers’ complaints may be representative of an existential dilemma rather than reflective of the peculiar inadequacies of HSR.

Most important, however, is that in evaluations of the influence of HSR, aside from passing remarks about contextual matters, inferences about the effects of HSR have been made on the basis of process variables almost exclusively. It has been typical to assert that HSR has had little additive impact on policy and then to adduce characteristics of HSR and health policy that support the assertion.

Indeed, there are some distinctive features of the HSR-policy relationship that invite this sort of reasoning. We will describe these in very general terms. In some respects, the material we present actually amplifies the evidence usually cited in favor of a null model. Our discussion will also show that certain reforms of HSR that are aimed at making it more policy effective are misdirected. We will also present a critique of the concepts that support the position that policy has not been significantly affected by HSR. We suggest that the current attention given this notion may be caused by the fact that it represents a fairly clear and defensible position on the HSR-policy relationship, whereas a more realistic version admits of no such conclusions. To clarify this situation, a rough framework in which to consider the HSR-policy relationship is outlined.

The overall thrust of this review clearly militates against any major restructuring of HSR activities to heighten their direct impact on policy.

FACTORS THAT INHIBIT AN HSR-POLICY RELATIONSHIP

Problem Formulation

To search for the solution of a problem is an absurdity. For either you know what you are looking for, and then there is no problem; or you do not know what you are looking for, and then you are not looking for anything and cannot expect to find anything.

Plato, Meno

Plato’s description of a basic research dilemma is clearly somewhat exaggerated, for there are degrees to which a problem can be formulated