

Navigating Wicked Issues in Healthcare: Insights from Glenda Eoyang

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Dr Glenda Eoyang, Founding Executive Director of the Human Systems Dynamics Institute, delivered the Centre for Healthcare Innovation (CHI)'s 17th Masterclass on "Wicked Issues in Healthcare".

Healthcare systems across the globe faces challenges that defy resolution, what Dr Eoyang calls "wicked issues". Drawing from her expertise in complexity science, Dr Eoyang offered a fresh perspective on how we can rethink and respond to these pertinent issues, such as mental health, which often seem insurmountable.

The key to solving wicked problems, according to Dr Eoyang, is not to search for a single solution but to understand and influence the patterns that shape these issues. By focusing on these systemic patterns and following a set of guiding rules, we can initiate meaningful changes and strategies for navigating complexity.

Three Emerging Patterns in Healthcare

Dr Eoyang highlighted three key patterns that are shaping healthcare today: Integration, Individuation, and Agency.

1. Integration

Imagine a healthcare system where different sectors - medical providers, social workers, and community organisations - work seamlessly together. Integration is about weaving together diverse resources into a unified system that addresses not just physical health, but the broader spectrum of needs, including social and financial support. In this model, care is holistic and collaborative.

2. Individuation

Every individual is unique, and healthcare must reflect that. Individuation bridges the gap between serving the collective and addressing individual needs. It is time to create solutions that can be tailored to fit specific community contexts and personal circumstances.

3. Agency

The final pattern is Agency - the power for individuals to take control of their own health. NHG's ambitious vision of adding 15 million years of healthy life can only be achieved by empowering people to make healthier choices. When individuals are given the freedom, tools, and collective support to make healthier choices, they become active participants in a shared journey towards better health outcomes.

Embracing Complexities: Shifting Patterns through Simple Rules

After identifying these patterns, Dr Eoyang introduced the concept of "simple rules". These are guiding principles that help both individuals and systems adapt to complexity while maintaining coherence, similar to how birds in a flock can achieve coordinated movement by following just three rules: fly towards the centre, match the speed of neighbours, and avoid collisions.

“What are rules that will give local freedom, local adaptation, using local intelligence and coherent patterns that you are trying to set?”

Dr Eoyang shared four simple rules to navigate complexities in health systems:

1. Encourage Inquiry

Instead of jumping into conclusions or defending assumptions, Dr Eoyang advocates for turning judgement into curiosity, assumptions into questions, disagreements into shared exploration, and defensiveness into shared exploration. When we approach diverse teams or problems with an open mind, we uncover solutions that might otherwise stay hidden.

Singapore's healthcare system is known for its strong top-down approach. However, this can sometimes lead to a gap between policy makers and the communities they serve. When



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3. Shift Perspectives – Zoom In and Zoom Out

Sometimes we need the big picture – a bird's eye view to guide our actions and ensure consistency. Other times, we must zoom in to focus on specific needs. Striking the right balance between these perspectives allows us to address broad

Adaptive Action: From Patterns to Change

Expounding on the first simple rule to “Encourage inquiry”, Dr Glenda emphasized the importance of adaptive action – a continuous cycle of inquiry, sense-making, and action.



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