INNOVATION in HEALTH CARE: THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES IN FACILITATING OR INHIBITING INNOVATION

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ABSTRACT Innovation in Health Care - The Role of Professional Boundaries in Facilitating or Inhibiting Innovation

The study of the diffusion of innovation remains an important theme. Early linear models (Rogers, 1995) have given way to less linear approaches (Van de Ven et al, 1999) and this is a perspective which we develop further in this paper. The use of the term 'the spread of innovation' rather than 'diffusion' signals our non linear perspective. We start by suggesting that highly professionalised organizations present distinctive innovation processes which need to be studied further. Health care organizations can be seen as good examples of such professionalised settings.

We present empirical evidence from recent case studies (8) examining the career of innovations in UK health care. These cases were drawn from both the acute and primary care sectors in a matched pair of studies. We found that professionals remained a highly influential group within these innovation processes. With many professional groups involved in decision making , innovations found it difficult to cross occupational boundaries. We highlight (i) the presence of professionally based 'communities of practice' between which effective communication was problematic (ii) the existence of many competing research paradigms, again linked to particular professional and social groupings. These two findings add to the literature on non linear models of innovation spread.

Key words: Innovation; Diffusion; Health Care Organisations