Framing change

The system of mental healthcare in Germany requires more than medical-technical innovation – it requires innovative policy reform, as Paul Bomke and Nathaniel Kendall-Taylor explain

IN 2012, healthcare expenditures in Germany exceeded €300bn,[1] accounting for 11.3% of GDP – 2% higher than the OECD average. Nearly a third of these costs were from the hospital sector, while spending on prevention programmes accounted for less than 7% of healthcare costs.[2] Despite above average healthcare expenditures, Germany ranks below average in the EU in key health and well-being outcomes.[3] These figures reveal a system that reactively spends massive amounts of resources to achieve relatively poor outcomes – making it clear that the 'healthcare' system is an 'illness-care' system.

Paradigmatic split

Mental health, in particular, is an area where the spending-to-outcomes paradox and the lack of innovation are particularly striking. Over the last two decades, the German mental health system has experienced a paradigmatic split – with the acute care branch of the system moving towards an increasingly hospital-based and pharmaceutical-driven approach, and the community-based care approach moving into an integrative, community based support and preventive direction. As the differences between these branches have grown, mental health outcomes in Germany have suffered. Creating a more unified approach to mental health care has the potential to improve outcomes. New Zealand, for example, has invested in a strategy based on prevention, early intervention, skill building and community-based support, resulting in marked decreases in the very areas where the German system has faltered.[4,5]

While prevention-oriented strategies have the potential to improve mental health outcomes, investments in such work have been cut significantly over the last decade. The lack of demand for these services among the public is at least part of the explanation for these cuts and the fact that the prevention work that remains is focused narrowly on only the most high-profile areas – such as sexually transmitted diseases and smoking.

Improving mental healthcare and devoting more resources to prevention is made even more challenging because mental health is simply not on the public's radar as a social issue.[6] Public awareness efforts that have been made appear to have been ineffective in getting this issue onto the public agenda and expanding public understanding.

Paddling against the current

Over the last five years, Pfalzklinikum, located in South West Germany, has attempted to improve mental health outcomes by providing services that focus on early intervention, coping skill development and supporting independent living. Unfortunately, a significant part of Pfalzklinikum's efforts have been spent paddling against the current – managing mistrust with the so-called 'cost bearers' and working with clients, trying to bridge the gap between the role as a 'patient' and as a citizen. Over the last five years it has become clear that communications challenges are impeding Pfalzklinikum's efforts to improve mental health outcomes.

Thinking seriously about the importance of communications research led Pfalzklinikum to the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative in Alberta, Canada. Here, Pfalzklinikum found an approach to communications that took seriously, and empirically, the role of public understanding in improving social outcomes. The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative was using an innovative strategy to combine scientific knowledge with communications research to improve mental health policy and practice. They were working with a non-profit communications research organisation called the FrameWorks Institute.

As members of Pfalzklinikum began to study and observe the work of the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative and the FrameWorks Institute, they became convinced that improving mental health outcomes in Germany would require more than new medical, therapeutic or pharmaceutical innovations – it would require investments in strategic communication as part of a larger social innovation strategy.

So we have to answer the question: Why is investing in communications research is a vital part of improving social outcomes and social innovation in mental health?
Public understanding is a key driver of the policy and programmatic innovations that are essential to sustained change and measureable improvements in social outcomes. As Mauss and Wolfe wrote almost 40 years ago:
"There is no such thing as a social problem, until enough people, with enough power in the society, agree that there is. Social problems are produced by public opinion, not by particular social conditions, undesirable or otherwise."[7]

We would take this further and argue that there is no social *solution* until there is both space in public opinion for new ideas and public will to drive reform.

Innovative policy reforms have the power to affect social systems and improve social outcomes. The public can pave or block the road toward innovative policy. Where there is robust public understanding and support for solutions, there emerges a demand for new policies. Public demand for change puts immense pressure on policy makers and practitioners to make and implement change. On the other hand, where there is not the space in public discourse, efforts to enact policy change will stall and languish, never gaining the momentum of public will required to change systems and, in turn, improve lives and outcomes.

In this way, public opinion is the harbinger of the policy and programmatic change that experts and advocates know is necessary to improve social outcomes.

Culture in mind

If public understanding is so important, what can advocates and experts do to shape and expand the 'organized mass'[8] of public thinking in ways that open up space for more productive discussions of and support for better policy? The answer lies with the idea of 'culture in mind'.[9] As members of a common culture, people share foundational ways of looking at the world – what anthropologists call 'cultural models'. These models might include the assumption that individuals, through their exertion of willpower, are responsible for their outcomes and the improvements thereof, or the implicit understanding that social problems like poverty and injustice are simply too deeply ingrained to meaningfully change. These shared expressions of culture in mind influence the way that people process and react to information. Culture in mind has the power to make certain solutions hard to engage with and get behind and others easy to support.

The fact that these cultural understandings can complicate efforts to change systems is frustrating to those who seek new approaches to improve outcomes. However, cultural models are flexible and responsive to information cues and patterns of presentation – understanding is frame dependent.[10]

Communication has the power to open new avenues of public thinking and translate information in ways that allow for meaningful engagement and more space for productive debate. This is the science of *Framing*. In its ability to help experts and advocates navigate the landscape of public understanding, framing holds the key to leveraging the role of public understanding in systems reform for sustained social change.

Grounded in the cognitive

By studying public understanding and empirically testing framing strategies, the FrameWorks Institute seeks to translate scientific and expert information in ways that expand public discourse. The FrameWorks Institute pursues a portfolio of research projects for example, investigating how Americans view issues including, health access, immigration, obesity, mental health, child development, climate change, racial disparities and public safety. Primarily working in the United States, but also internationally, FrameWorks

has created an approach to communications research that is grounded in the cognitive and social sciences, using a multi-disciplinary process that pays attention to the public's deeply held worldviews and widely held assumptions. The approach is designed to help experts and advocates leverage their work to change the public discourse and pave the way for social change.

We have found that thinking seriously about communications is a vital front-end activity for those working to change systems and improve outcomes. When communication is taken seriously and empirically, experts and advocates can create and sustain public support for the changes necessary to improve outcomes. Surrounded by this support, their efforts can gain traction, changing systems and improving outcomes. This is why public understanding matters and why an empirical approach to communications are our most valuable tools in creating and sustaining the systems changes that lead to better social outcomes. Frames make change.

References

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Paul Bomke
CEO
Pfalzklinikum für Psychiatrie und Neurologie

tel: +49 6349 900 1000

paul.bomke@pfalzklinikum.de
www.pfalzklinikum.de

Dr. Nathaniel Kendall-Taylor
Vice President for Research
FrameWorks Institute, 1776 I St. NW
Suite 940, Washington, DC 20006

tel: +1 301 204 3480
nkendall-taylor@frameworksinstitute.org