
Domains of public affairs informatics research: an introduction

Thomas T.H. Wan*

College of Health and Public Affairs,
University of Central Florida,
P.O. Box 163680, Orlando, FL 32816-3680, USA
Fax: 407-823-0822
E-mail: Thomas.wan@ucf.edu
*Corresponding author

Natthani Meemon

Faculty of Social Science and Humanities,
Mahidol University,
Salaya, Butthamonton,
Nakorn Pathom, 73170, Thailand
E-mail: nmeemon@gmail.com

Biographical notes: Thomas T.H. Wan is a Professor of Public Affairs and Health Management and Informatics. He is an Associate Dean for research of the College of Health and Public Affairs and holds a joint appointment with the College of Medicine at the University of Central Florida. His research interests include health informatics research, health services management and evaluation research, long-term care research, and global health.

Natthani Meemon was a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Optics, University of Rochester. She holds a PhD in Public Affairs with concentration in Health Services Research and Administration. Previously, she studied at the graduate level in Thailand, focusing on social development, particularly in the areas of sustainable development and community participation. She has an extended experience on HIV/AIDS care system monitoring and evaluation, evidenced-based policy analysis, and research methodology. Her current focus is research design for translating biomedical optics technology to clinical application relevant to public health.

It is over a decade that the 21st century has begun, with various challenges from all events that have changed the world; rise of terrorisms, natural and man-made disasters, outbreaks of new fatal diseases, and revolutionised internet social networks. Information technology has become one of the most important catalysts of globalisation, and all nations around the world are now sharing similar perspectives and concerns. The dynamics of global focus reflect never-ending tasks of the world leaders, public officials, and academicians to seek for the ways to prevent threats and generate higher living standard to maintain the well being of the citizens.

This special issue of the *International Journal of Public Policy* is an output from exceptional collaboration with multidisciplinary investigators. Presented by 14 scholarly

articles, it illustrates an integrated perspective of public affairs research with the application of evidence-based approach across diverse disciplines. Most importantly, the studies from different countries discussed here offer a strong statement of recent trends in global public affairs. The presentation of these studies is portrayed in four domains, including healthcare reforms, population aging and quality of life; roles of informatics in healthcare; cost containment, accessibility, and quality of public services; and public services performance.

The first domain emphasises a main global concern: healthcare reforms, population aging and quality of life. Wang et al. raise the question why healthcare become so expensive in China and give an interesting policy review that covers the changes in healthcare financing since 1979 and the impacts to the people in one of the most populous countries in the world. As a result of decreased mortality rate due to the advancement of medical technology, the number of ageing population is accelerated. Many concerns have been raised on the issues of future economic growth decline due to change in economic activities; survivability of publicly funded healthcare and pension systems; and burdening of future generations, when the elderly become the majority of population (Lee and Mason, 2011). Long-term care starts to play increasingly important role in elderly care in several countries, even in the society that the care of elderly culturally has been relied on the younger family members. A qualitative study by Wu et al. gathers pertinent perceptions from the stakeholders in Chinese elderly care environment to point up the needs and expectation of the elderly and practitioners on nursing home care. However, a majority of long-term care facilities is facing serious financial difficulties. Mi et al. thus discuss the relationship between incidence of disability and the age of the elderly in a county in China. Using evidence-based approach, the study predicts the future needs of long-term care and it is expected that this method could be applied in similar settings. In addition, Golden et al. point out the challenges of the potential feasibility of a managed care programme for long-term care by comparing the care needs of nursing home diversion enrollees and nursing home residents in Florida. Regarding the population's quality of life, Chung and Lee seek to investigate the income-related inequality in relation to health-related quality of life, measured by South Korea's adjusted instrument. Relative contribution of each dimension of health-related quality of life is compared.

The second domain affirms the role of informatics in healthcare. There have been global attempts to promote health information exchange. It is found that health information technology positively impact efficiency, quality, and patient satisfaction (Buntin et al., 2011). As such, Villalobos-Solano and Ramirez propose the consolidation of a health information system in Costa Rica and call for the collaboration among the country's significant stakeholders. The studies concerning the use of information technology in healthcare setting typically focus on how to increase the number of healthcare providers who implement the innovations. Hotchkiss et al. investigate the perceptions of healthcare providers about electronic medical records (EMR) and e-prescribing. The implications of this study are offered to administrators who plan to implement EMR within safety net clinics. Another study from Shen and Moseley attempts to identify organisational factors that influence the adoption of electronic health record systems among non-federal hospitals. In addition, Harrison and James narrow the scope of health information technology into pharmaceutical services. Their descriptive analysis indicates the increasing investments and utilisations of pharmacy information systems.

The third domain reiterates the importance of cost containment, accessibility, and quality of public services. The evidence gathered from national health data is also used to identify errors that are harmful to the medical payment system. In the USA, Wan and Shasky employ exploratory and confirmatory statistical methods and mine the medical claims data to identify patterns of care and how individual, organisational, and contextual factors influencing a pattern of medical billing errors and Medicare/Medicaid fraud or abuse. Manocchia et al. use a large dataset of more than 50,000 health consumers to indicate factors that could make them prone to healthcare fraud.

The fourth domain takes up public services performance, both at national and organisational levels. Current performance measures are derived from entrepreneurial perspective on service delivery thus; the emphasis is often put on efficiency (Boyne and Walker, 2010). A comparative study conducted by Nguyen et al. using data envelopment analysis (DEA) compares operational efficiency among hospitals in Vietnam and South Korea and highlights the efficiency gap between developed and developing countries. Another unique study is an evaluation of coca supply-reduction programmes in Bolivia by Unlu and Kapti. Interestingly, it is an analysis of failure of this alternative development programme, which in some extent could point out important issues that both national and international stakeholders should take into account for effective policy implementation. Importantly, public employees or practitioners play a vital role on public services delivery. Employee job satisfaction among public servants has been consistently found to associate with overall public services performance (Yang and Kassekert, 2010). Lee and Kim present a case study of South Korea on factors influencing job satisfaction and propose various policy implications to promote human capital.

The contributions of evidence-based public management are increasingly recognised during the recent years. The 14 studies presented in this special issue can serve as examples of how scholars in various countries conduct informatics research to indicate, predict and address public problems. Ultimately, this approach is to be well-polished and will take the role in advancing the management and utilisation of empirical knowledge to serve the best of global population.

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