



Critical Perspectives on “Empowerment” in Health Care (Theme I)

Investigator: Roma Harris

Background

In the context of health care, “patient empowerment” generally refers to individual control over matters concerning health, disease and illness. Strategies for empowering patients in the health system are numerous and include, for example, training patients to ask their doctors more questions, patient ‘self-management’ programs, promoting patient involvement in treatment decision-making, and providing consumer health information over the Internet. The impact of such strategies, though, has been mixed. The popularity of the idea of empowering citizens vis-à-vis their own health has emerged in the context of several significant social trends, including tremendous growth in patient-focused self-help and mutual aid programs, a rise in health care consumerism, increased patient activism and organization, and a great upsurge in the popularity of complementary and alternative medicine. A significant backdrop to all of this activity is the desire on the part of many Western governments to reduce or at least curtail further growth in public spending for health care and a concomitant pressure by private interests to exploit the commercial potential of health care and health information, especially through the use of the Internet to support so-called ‘e-health’ innovations. A significant element of this shift from a public responsibility for health care to the private sector involves a transfer of the burden for managing personal health care onto the shoulders of individual citizens.

Project Description

This project examines the various meanings of “empowerment” in the context of health care, along with its political, economic and social implications. It fills a gap in critical understanding of the political implications of the popularity of “patient empowerment”. It is anticipated that this will be of assistance to policy-makers, as well as practitioners whose work encompasses “patient empowerment”, such as health care providers, social service workers and information professionals.

Methods

This project consists of a discourse analysis of key policy and industry documents and a literature review on “patient empowerment”. Researchers will also conduct a political economic analysis of the changing health systems in Canada, the USA and the UK, as well as related industries, and their relationship to the popularity of the idea of “patient empowerment” in health settings.