

Evidence-based management for performance improvement in healthcare

This special issue collects novel and relevant contributions that advance both the theory and practice of evidence-based management (EBMgt) for performance improvement in healthcare. All together the selected contributions shed new light on what we know so far about EBMgt in healthcare and they offer original insights to further the ongoing debate.

Although the term “evidence-based management” (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006) is relatively new and not yet consolidated, the argument of informing management practice and decisions through the systematic use of different sources of evidence is not novel. Following the attention and popularity that evidence-based medicine (EBM) (Sackett *et al.*, 1996) has received in healthcare over the last 20 years, scholars in different disciplines have progressively focused their research efforts to extend what has been learned from EBM to management (Arndt and Bigelow, 2009). This “gold-rush” has acquired momentum as a result of the increasing availability of very large bodies of data. In the specific context of healthcare, not only have serious concerns about the actual sustainability of the healthcare systems of the most developed countries reinforced the enthusiasm for EBMgt, but also the manifested challenge of implementing any change that “comes from the outside” in such a professional and knowledge-intensive socio-technical context. In this view, scholars of different disciplines, such as strategy, management, organization theory and design, operations and innovation management, public management, and operational research, have started an intense debate about how theories and practices about performance improvement developed thus far in product/manufacturing companies have to be re-thought and extended when applied to service, professional, and knowledge-intensive organizations, such as hospitals (Wright *et al.*, 2016). EBMgt has thus emerged as the preferable approach that connects many solutions that are currently under discussion.

EBMgt asserts that managers should ground their judgment and practice on rational, transparent, and rigorous evidence that could help them explore and evaluate the pros and cons of alternatives and that they should be informed by relevant, robust academic research and literature reviews (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003). Healthcare is among the sectors that might benefit more from such an approach. Evidence emerges in healthcare as the keystone for informing decision-making at all levels. At the micro level, evidence should solve frequent conflicts among physicians’ different experiences and opinions about the most cost-effective and safe therapy for a group of patients. At the organizational level, hospitals managers should look at evidence as legitimization of the adoption of innovative health technologies that prove to be cost-effective and safe in other organizations, according to the well-established health technology assessment paradigm. Finally, at the macro level, policy-makers should invest in administrative health database research to extract evidence from their extensive and longitudinal databases, to identify those strategies and initiatives that might work better, and to develop the so-called “precision policies.”

Considering these three levels of analysis, this special issue focuses the research attention on the use of EBMgt paradigm by physicians, hospital managers, and policy-makers to enable change and improvements along the whole supply and value chain of healthcare. In doing so, it reports scientific evidence regarding how the various actors of the healthcare ecosystem could, and actually do, make sense of the difference sources of evidence (e.g. clinical data, administrative data, laboratory and



genetic data, big data, etc.) and to what extent they subordinate their judgment and experience to evidence.

This special issue merges conceptual and empirical studies and it is aimed at influencing the largest audience possible. The first panel of manuscripts collects contributions that are mostly conceptual on the role of EBMgt to support effective management practices and decision-making in healthcare. In this view, they offer an overview of the literature and argumentation on the building dynamics of EBMgt.

The first contribution, by Roshanghalb *et al.* (2018), presents a systematic literature review on EBMgt in healthcare. Such a review classifies past studies accordingly to an original “process” perspective anchored on the input–process–outcomes model. Most notably, the authors argue for the need to take a step ahead within the current debate on EBMgt through a more pragmatic approach that connects, with a “golden thread,” four main logical blocks. They are: groups of decision-makers (users of evidence), types of management practices or managerial decisions (outcomes), types of analysis and tools (processes), and sources of evidence (inputs). Their original systematization of past studies sheds light on relevant gaps that should be filled in through future research. Moreover, practitioners might take advantage of the “process” framework to consolidate and share best practices in terms of EBMgt.

The second contribution, by Martelli and Hayirli (2018), challenges the current debate on EBMgt by observing that scholars are entrapped into a sterile discussion about what “best available evidence” actually is and, as a result, that they are not able to advance their theoretical arguments. The authors claim that a possible “way-out” is offered by the acknowledgment that the concept of “best available evidence” has three key dynamics – namely, rank, fit, and variety – that coexist to crystallize what is the “best” set of evidence for a specific decision/practice. The first dynamic assumes that the evidence generated by certain processes ranks higher than the evidence that is generated from other processes in supporting truth claims. The second dynamic, instead, evaluates “bestness” according to the exactness of fit between a situation at a point in time and the evidence compiled for that situation. Finally, the third dynamic, which is rooted in the cybernetic theory, assumes that the “best available evidence” can be generated by ensuring that a broad range of knowledge types is elicited from and reconciled across individuals. The authors speculate that, given the epistemic uncertainty and turbulence characterizing decision-making process in healthcare, the “best evidence” is produced by variety and not by rank or fit.

The following two contributions, therefore, illustrate EBMgt-based conceptual proposals for improving healthcare service delivery.

The contribution by Bruzzi *et al.* (2018) proposes a novel conceptual model for managing frail elderly patients in acute-care hospitals. The model redesigns the flow of these chronic patients and puts together organizational solutions that the literature considers effective in terms of outcomes and costs. The model assumes a patient-centered perspective and analyses the main problems, namely, admission, frail patient management, and delayed discharged, hampering the patients’ flow.

The contribution by Agnihothri and Agnihothri (2018) develops a model for applying EBMgt-based principles to chronic diseases. The authors point out that a new theoretical framework, entitled “Influence model of chronic healthcare,” introduces the critical areas where managers can identify and evaluate relevant changes for improving patient outcomes. Their model can be used by hospital managers to determine the effectiveness of their decisions and strategies for improving healthcare quality.

The remaining contributions are predominantly empirical, and they offer a comprehensive overview on the use of EBMgt within specific healthcare processes, both clinical and administrative/managerial.

The contribution by Ippolito *et al.* (2018) investigates EBMgt in the peculiar context of hospital triage through qualitative comparative analysis, which is a novel method that has attracted enthusiasm among scholars of the social sciences. The authors investigated the interplay between individual and organizational factors in determining the emergence of errors with respect to different decisional situations. They argue that individual and organizational factors are strictly interwoven and factors that lead to the outcomes of the decision-making process are not homogenous. As result, any intervention should emerge from an in-depth understanding of the organizational context and the peculiarities of different typologies of decisions. Additionally, interventions must be aimed at fine-tuning the relationships between individuals, contextual resources, and constraints. In so doing, this study proposes a new contingency-based perspective, drawing on the theory of complex adaptive systems, for identifying the patterns of factors that determine the emergence of errors in triage decision-making.

The following contribution by Lenkowicz *et al.* (2018) proposes a conformance checking methodology based on process mining to evaluate the adherence and efficiency of clinical processes. This research interprets the EBMgt paradigm within the assessment and evaluation of actual patient clinical pathways against established clinical guidelines. Finally, the study coherently presents potential improvements for the evidence that has been gathered. While testing the methodology on advanced colon-rectal cancer treatment pathways, the work also offers an interesting real-case application, which could inspire interested practitioners to pursue similar initiatives.

The contribution by Ortiz-Barrios *et al.* (2018) deals with EBMgt with respect to patient risk assessment and proposes an integrated framework based on three different multi-criteria methods: analytic hierarchical process, decision-making trial, and evaluation laboratory, and Vikor. The authors tested their suggested approach in three hospitals in Colombia, where they assessed the risk of potential adverse events in hospitalized patients, and they discuss the key implications for both hospital managers and professionals.

The contribution by Cho *et al.* (2018) investigates cost determinants of dialysis facilities in Taiwan using multiple linear regression analysis. They show that the costs of dialysis treatments are influenced by several managerial factors, such as capacity, resource utilization rate, and geographical location. Their findings stimulate providers to consider new systems to control costs by increasing the operational efficiency. Their analysis can help regulators of health systems worldwide to design the reimbursement rates for cost accounts dealing with dialysis.

Next, we have a group of contributors investigating the healthcare processes and related decision-making dynamics from an organizational perspective, investigating resources and teams, the role of performance measurement and management control systems, and information systems.

The contribution by Grippa *et al.* (2018) investigates healthcare team interactions to redesign the care delivery model within a large US children's hospital and to increase the value for health actors (patients, families, and employees). They apply a social network methodology and focus on communication flow among patients, family members, and healthcare staff to measure knowledge flows, communication behavior, and the channels used to interact. This case study describes how the visualization and measurement of relational data can help the interdisciplinary healthcare teams identify patterns of interactions across hospital units and disciplines. The authors show how it is possible to identify structural properties of healthcare teams to promote knowledge sharing and improve team performance. In doing so, the authors offer a strong contribution for practitioners on the value of adopting social network-based methodology for organizational redesign.

The following contribution by Nuti *et al.* (2018) proposes a new generation of performance measurement systems (PMS) for the healthcare industry. They emphasize that patient care processes increasingly involve multiple organizations and, consequently, traditional PMS considering a single organization are somewhat inadequate. They present a PMS, which is graphically represented by a “stave,” whose focus is on a specific care pathway (e.g. the treatment of breast cancer), and it considers all organizations involved in the pathway. Such a PMS has already been adopted by 13 regional health systems in Italy.

Finally, the contribution by Metcalf *et al.* (2018) examines the effects of understaffing in hospital-unit respiratory care and it evaluates the impact on error rates in the USA. They also investigate the moderating effects of teamwork and integrated information systems. A higher rate of understaffing seems to be associated with more missed treatments and both teamwork and integrated information systems seem to have a moderating role in avoiding errors.

Davide Aloini

*Department of Energy, Systems, Territory and Construction Engineering,
University of Pisa, Pisa, Italy*

Lorella Cannavacciuolo

*Department of Industrial Engineering, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II,
Napoli, Italy*

Simone Gitto

Polytechnic Department of Engineering and Architecture, University of Udine, Udine, Italy

Emanuele Lettieri

*Dipartimento Ingegneria Gestionale, Politecnico di Milano Dipartimento di Ingegneria
Gestionale, Milano, Italy*

Paolo Malighetti

*Department of Management, Information and Production Engineering,
University of Bergamo, Dalmine, Italy, and*

Filippo Visintin

Department of Industrial Engineering, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Firenze, Italy

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About the Guest Editors

Davide Aloini, PhD, is Associate Professor of Business Process Management, Informatics for Logistics and Marketing at the Department of Energy, Systems, Land and Constructions Engineering at the University of Pisa, Italy. His research interests include business process management and collaborative/advanced ICT solutions, with special interest in large-scale project, healthcare systems and innovation in high-tech firms. Specifically, this includes process identification, modeling, analysis and improvement in complex healthcare systems and networks; exploitation of big data potential in operation management with a particular interest on marketing and CRM; collaborative ICT platform enhancing open innovation. He has published papers in international journals such as *Information & Management*, *European Journal of Operation Management*, *Business Process Management Journal*, *Production Planning and Control*, *Expert Systems with Applications* and *International Journal of Innovation Management*.

Lorella Cannavacciuolo is Assistant Professor in Management Accounting and has a PhD Degree in Economic and Managerial Engineering. Lorella Cannavacciuolo carries out her research activity at the Department of Industrial Engineering of University of Naples Federico II. Her research interests encompass innovation network systems in SMEs, process mapping and redesign, network measurements for large collaborative platforms, activity accounting models for cost performance management. Her research topics are carried out mainly in the healthcare sector. She has published paper in international journals and she serves as Reviewer for many international journals in operation and healthcare management.

Simone Gitto, PhD, is Associate Professor of Business and Management Engineering at University of Udine. He was Assistant Professor at University of Rome Tor Vergata. His main research interests

include air transport regulation, health efficiency and forecasting methods. His works have been published in international refereed journals, including *British Journal of Management*, *International Journal of Production Economics*, *Expert Systems with Applications*, *Journal of Air Transport Management*, *Journal of Productivity Analysis*, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *Telecommunications Policy*, *Transportation Research Part E* and *Transportation Research Part A*.

Emanuele Lettieri is Full Professor at the Department of Management, Economics and Industrial Engineering (DIG) of Politecnico di Milano. He chairs the Accounting, Finance & Control (AFC) and Healthcare Management (HCM) master's courses at Politecnico di Milano. He is Director of the International MBA Part-Time program at MIP Politecnico di Milano Graduate School of Business. His research interests are at the intersection among technology, management and healthcare, and deal with innovation management and performance improvement in healthcare. His current research works deal with the development of evidence-based improvement strategies in hospitals through the use of administrative data; the diffusion of digital innovation in healthcare, with a particular interest to digital services to citizens, apps and wearables; the assessment of innovations in healthcare accordingly to the health technology assessment discipline; the implementation of value-based strategies in healthcare. His research is both qualitative and quantitative. He has conducted multidisciplinary research in collaboration with Universities, research centers, healthcare institutions and hospitals. He has participated in applied research large-scale European projects. Finally, he is continuously involved in the education of healthcare professionals as well as healthcare companies' personnel with the design of *ad-hoc* classes.

Paolo Malighetti is Associate Professor at the University of Bergamo. He obtained PhD Degree in "Economics and Management of Technology" with a dissertation thesis: "Post-deregulation patterns and competition issues in European medium size airports". He spent a research visiting period at Department of Air Transport Management, Cranfield University. Since 2007 he is Research Fellow at ICCSAI. Since 2014, he is Director of the HTH – Human factor and technology in healthcare a research center co-founded by the University of Bergamo and Papa Giovanni XXIII Hospital. As Director of HTH, he collaborates on several projects about the use of new technology supporting healthcare system and more broadly fostering wellbeing for older adults and chronic disease treatment.

Filippo Visintin is Associate Professor of Service Management at the Department of Industrial Engineering of the University of Florence, Italy. He is Scientific Director of the IBIS Lab and Co-founder and Co-owner of Smartoperations srl. He regularly advises public and private healthcare organizations. His research interests include servitization of manufacturing and healthcare operations management. He is Author of several research papers published in journals such as: *European Journal of Operational Research*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *International Journal of Production Economics*, *Computers in Industry*, *Flexible Service and Manufacturing Journal*, *Journal of Intelligent Manufacturing*, *Production Planning and Control* and *IMA Journal of Management Mathematics*.