

Navigating Wicked Issues in Healthcare: Insights from Glenda Eoyang



Photo of CHI's 17th Masterclass. From left to right: Dr Glenda Eoyang (Executive Director of Human Systems Dynamics Institute) and Ms Koh Huey Bing (Director, Organisational Development, CHI).

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Dr Glenda Eoyang, Founding Executive Director of the Human Systems Dynamics Institute, delivered the Centre for Healthcare Innovation (CHI)'s 17th Masterclass on "Wicked Issues in Healthcare".

Healthcare systems across the globe face challenges that defy resolution, what Dr Eoyang calls "wicked issues". Drawing from her expertise in complexity science, Dr Eoyang offered a fresh perspective on how we can rethink and respond to these pertinent issues, such as mental health, which often seem insurmountable.

The key to solving wicked problems, according to Dr Eoyang, is not a search for that one solution, rather to understand and influence the patterns that shape these issues. By focusing on these systemic patterns and following a set of guiding rules, we can initiate meaningful changes and strategies for navigating complexity.

Three Emerging Patterns in Healthcare

Dr Eoyang highlighted three key patterns that are shaping healthcare today: Integration, Individuation, and Agency.

1. Integration

Imagine a healthcare system where different sectors - medical providers,

social workers, and community organisations – work seamlessly together. Integration is about weaving together diverse resources into a unified system that addresses not just physical health, but the broader spectrum of needs, including social and financial support. In this model, care is holistic and collaborative.

2. Individuation

Every individual is unique, and healthcare must reflect that. Individuation bridges the gap between serving the collective and addressing individual needs. It is time to create solutions that can be tailored to fit specific community contexts and personal circumstances.

3. Agency

Agency is the power for individuals to take control of their own health. NHC's ambitious vision of adding 15 million years of healthy life can only be achieved by empowering people to make healthier choices. When individuals are given the freedom, tools, and collective support to make healthier choices, they become active participants in a shared journey towards better health outcomes.

Embracing Complexities: Shifting Patterns through Simple Rules

Dr Eoyang introduced the concept of "simple rules" as guiding principles that

can help both individuals and systems adapt to complexity while maintaining coherence; drawing analogy from simple rules a flock of birds follow to achieve coordinated movement: fly towards the centre, match the speed of neighbours, and avoid collisions.

“What are rules that will give local freedom, local adaptation, using local intelligence and coherent patterns that you are trying to set?”

Dr Eoyang shared **four simple rules** to navigate complexities in health systems:

1. Encourage Inquiry

Instead of jumping into conclusions or defending assumptions, Dr Eoyang advocates for turning judgement into curiosity, assumptions into questions, disagreements and defensiveness into shared exploration. When we approach diverse teams or problems with an open mind, we uncover solutions that might otherwise stay hidden.



Singapore's healthcare system is known for its strong top-down approach. However, this can sometimes lead to a gap between policy makers and the communities they serve. When disagreements arise over policies, turning judgement into curiosity – by asking questions like “What do residents truly need?” or “How can policies be more inclusive” – can help bridge this gap. Encouraging open inquiry would allow diverse voices from healthcare professionals, community leaders, and patients to shape the system's direction, fostering shared understanding and reducing tensions over implementation.

2. Harness Differences

Every person brings something unique to the table, whether it's their expertise, culture, or health experience. These differences should not be seen as barriers but opportunities.

“ Unless you have differences, you will never have integration, individuation, and agency.

By holding space for these varied perspectives, we fuel innovation. Differences, when embraced, become the spark for new ideas and breakthroughs.

3. Shift Perspectives – Zoom In and Zoom Out

Sometimes we need the big picture – a bird's eye view to guide our actions and ensure consistency. Other times, we must zoom in to focus on specific needs. Striking the right balance between these perspectives allows us to address broad challenges and localised issues.

As Singapore pushes for more integration of health and social care, there are tensions between macro-level policies and micro-level challenges. HealthierSG for instance, promotes a national focus on preventive care and population health, but it may sometimes overlook the struggles and resources of primary care practitioners and the prioritisation between urgent care and preventive care in specific neighbourhoods. By applying this “Zoom In and Zoom Out” principle,



Photo of Dr Glenda Eoyang sharing the three emerging patterns in healthcare.

Singapore can ensure that national strategies are adaptable to the specific realities of different community contexts, addressing unique challenges while maintaining overall coherence.

4. Seek Truth and Relevance

Truth is not always straightforward. It can be objective data, shared societal norms, or personal experiences. In moments of change, the challenge is knowing which truth to focus on. Recognising what is more relevant in a given moment is key to making decisions that truly matter.

Healthcare policies are often built on objective data, but they must also account for the lived experiences of individuals. For instance, while government initiatives may be based on statistics showing the effectiveness of interventions, the subjective truth – the experiences of patients or healthcare workers – can sometimes differ. Acknowledging the interplay of objective, normative, and subjective truths enables healthcare systems to craft more empathetic and responsive policies that balance both measurable outcomes and human realities.

Adaptive Action: From Patterns to Change

Expounding on the first simple rule to “Encourage inquiry”, Dr Glenda emphasized the importance of adaptive action – a continuous cycle of inquiry, sense-making, and action.



Photo of What? So What? Now What? framework.

By using the framework of “What? So What? Now What?” framework, we can reflect on emerging patterns, sense-make them, take action, and evaluate any new patterns again. This iterative process ensures that systems remain flexible and responsive, learning from both successes and surprises. Continuous learning and flexibility are crucial for navigating unexpected challenges.

“ When you think about surprises, think about what surprised you. Surprises can hold a great deal of energy, and help you anticipate what might be coming ahead. Rather than trying to close the ‘box’, embrace surprise and anticipate change.

In Singapore, this approach was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ability to adapt swiftly to emerging patterns – such as changes in case numbers, new strains, or evolving treatment protocols – demonstrated the power of continuous inquiry and adaptation. Moving forward, the HealthierSG initiative can benefit from this adaptive approach, continuously evaluating population health data and refining strategies to meet evolving needs.



Left to right: Professor Eugene Fidelis Soh (ED, CHI), Ms Koh Huey Bing (Director, Organisational Development, CHI), Dr Glenda Eoyang (Executive Director of Human Systems Dynamics Institute), Dr Tang Kong Choong (CEO, TTSH)

On a personal level, continuous inquiry and adaptive action encourages healthcare professionals to reflect on their practice and find opportunities for growth. As Dr Glenda puts it,

“ If you are not making any progress, you may be stuck. But if you are moving forward, even slowly, you are working towards mastery

Conclusion

Dr Eoyang’s masterclass provided a profound yet practical approach for tackling wicked issues in healthcare. By shifting our mindset from problem-solving to pattern-shaping, and by applying simple rules and adaptive action, we can navigate the inherent complexities of healthcare systems. As we face future “wicked issues” in healthcare, Dr Eoyang’s principles offer valuable insights for navigating the ever-changing dynamics of our system.



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