

Health reform and regionalization in Alberta

Regionalization, health reform, public policy

Background

This study was part of a cross-provincial project aimed at understanding the determinants of health care policy decision-making related to health reforms during the 1990s. The impact of government policy choices in these areas has ranged from negligible to substantial; yet to date there is limited research that describes the factors and processes which shape these policy outcomes. The findings from the case studies can assist in identifying pre-requisites for future policy change.

Methods

Semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, representing the political executive, civil servants, and representatives of major NGOs or interest groups. Relevant written records (government publications, Hansard, print media) were reviewed to establish context and for confirmatory purposes. Data were analyzed using N*6 software program and a pre-established coding framework. We sought to determine the relative role and importance of institutional factors; ideas, beliefs, values; interests; and external environmental factors in explaining policy outcomes.

Results

The results from the Alberta-regionalization case suggest that government moved to introduce regionalization for several key reasons. New political leadership, which emphasized accountability and cost control, allowed government to overcome opposition to significant structural reform in health care. Previous attempts to reform the system through voluntary co-operation had failed to be successful. By not impinging upon the original bargain with organized medicine, government avoided significant collective resistance from doctors.

Conclusion

Driven by overarching concern with spending reduction and accountability, the Alberta government undertook a major regionalization initiative. Regionalization of the health care service system has since proved to be a foundational reform that has created new possibilities for policy innovation across a range of health care issues.