

Ten to... High-value health

systems Value in Health

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“Ten to... Reading List: Essential Resources for Value-Based Healthcare”

With its Ten to... reading list series, Value in Health shares foundational academic articles, grey literature and books on topics important to the delivery of better value healthcare. This selection comprises the texts that our policy team most frequently find useful in its work.

The aim is to provide a quick reference for policymakers and practitioners to get up to speed on selected topics, a signpost to what we consider to be the most relevant material. In making our selections, we sought both groundbreaking research and accessible works. This series is not intended to provide comprehensive surveys of available literature, and inclusion in a list does not imply endorsement from Value in Health.

For content accessible online, full text links have been provided. If you require further resources, please contact our team at Value in Health valueinhealth@cnhi.gov.sa. Our Ten to... series will be updated periodically, so suggestions for additional content for future editions are welcomed.

Ten to... High-value health systems provides a starting point for readers interested in the topic of national policy for effective and high-performing health systems. What is a health system, and what should be its purpose? And how can countries configure their health systems to deliver the objectives they wish them to achieve?

These references describe different approaches to conceptualizing health systems. As these texts show, value-based healthcare, which often focuses on provider reform and redesign of financial incentives, is one of a range of levers available to policymakers and practitioners to bring about better value in their health systems. Clearly, health system reform must be seen as both a technical challenge as well as a testing exercise in managing stakeholders to deliver change.



Policy & Practice



Roberts, MJ, Hsiao, W, Berman, P, Reich, MR. (2008). Getting health reform right: a guide to improving performance and equity. New York: Oxford University Press. (Book)

Written by academics with deep experience of the theory and practice of health reform, this book introduces what has become a seminal approach to analyzing health system reform - the five “control knobs” of financing, payment, organization, regulation and behavior that policymakers can fine-tune to strengthen the performance of their health systems. The emphasis on outcomes, describing health systems as “a means to an end”, anticipates subsequent research on high-value health systems. An invaluable foundational text for any health policymaker.

Atun, R, Moore, G. (2021) Building a high-value health system. New York: Oxford University Press. (Book)

Aimed primarily at educators and learners, this book offers a structured methodology for analyzing national health systems and developing policy options for reform. High-value health systems are ones that achieve the goals they are set, whether these relate to value-for-money, good health for the population or meeting citizen expectations. This is a useful and practical “workbook” that contains many relevant models and case examples.

Smith, PC, Sagan, A, Siciliani, L, Figueras, J. (2023). Building on value-based health care: towards a health system perspective. Health Policy. 104918 (809KB, PDF)

How can the concept of value-based healthcare, which typically focuses on healthcare providers competing on patient outcomes, be extended to apply to all stakeholders in health systems? This paper describes a conceptual framework for high-value health systems, defining health system value as “the contribution of the health system to societal wellbeing”. Rather than expecting value-based healthcare implementation to be mainly driven by service reform in providers, this model identifies the necessary actions for policymakers, purchasers, practitioners and patients to create value across the whole health system.

World Health Organization. (2007) Everybody’s Business : Strengthening health systems to improve health outcomes. WHO’s Framework for action. Geneva: WHO Press. (844KB, PDF)

One of the best-known models of the elements of a health system is the WHO’s “Building Blocks” framework. Six core functions are identified: service delivery; health workforce; information; medical products, vaccines and technologies; financing; leadership and governance (or stewardship). The framework aims to comprehensively describe what a health system needs to do well, both individually and interdependently, to deliver on its objectives.

De Savigny, D, Taghreed, A. (Eds) (2009). Systems thinking for health systems strengthening. Geneva: WHO Press (1,580KB, PDF)

This report defines ten practical steps towards health system strengthening, building on insights from systems thinking. It addresses both the design of system-level interventions and the evaluation of their effects and applies systems thinking to the WHO’s Building Blocks framework. The paper makes a valuable contribution by considering healthcare as a complex adaptive system and explicitly addressing the unintended consequences, non-linearity and path dependence evident in health policy.

Shakarishvili, G. et al. (2010) Converging health systems frameworks : Towards a concepts-to-action roadmap for health systems strengthening in low and middle-income countries. Global Health Governance. 3(2). (178KB, PDF)

Multiple approaches are available to analyzing health systems and developing interventions to improve their performance and outcomes. For those interested in finding out more about these models, this paper provides a critical synthesis of existing frameworks, as well as proposing a harmonized approach.

Murray, C., Frenk, J. (2000). A framework for assessing the performance of health systems. Bulletin of the World Health Organization. 78(6) (415KB, PDF)

Murray and Frenk present an approach to assessing health system performance across three dimensions: improving health, enhancing responsiveness to the expectations of the population, and ensuring fairness in financial contribution. The various system functions described (service provision, resource generation, financing and stewardship) can be influenced through different policies to improve system performance. This framework was used to develop the report The World Health Report 2000 - Health systems; improving performance and the rankings of country health systems it contained (see Further Reading).

Polin, K. et al. (2021) “Top-Three” health reforms in 31 high-income countries in 2018 and 2019 : an expert informed overview. Health Policy, 815-832. (3,307KB, PDF)

This article comprises a wide-ranging discussion of the more common approaches taken by high-income countries to health system reform, based on feedback from national experts. Four categories of reform were prevalent: those relating to insurance coverage and resource generation; governance; healthcare purchasing and payment; and organization of hospital care. Sharing experiences of such similar initiatives between countries is proposed as a way of supporting more effective policy implementation.

Walt, G, Gilson, L. (1994). Reforming the health sector in developing countries : the central role of policy analysis. Health Policy and Planning. 9(4): 353-370. (1,459KB, PDF)

In health system reform, sound technical solutions are necessary but rarely sufficient. Walt and Gilson introduce a framework for analyzing health policy - the “policy triangle” - and emphasize that, while the accurate technical content of reforms is critical, successful implementation of health policy also requires careful consideration of context, process and actors. “How” and “who” are as important as “what”. Drawing from political science and economics, this influential paper is a useful reminder to policymakers that health policy is by necessity country- and context- dependent.

Savedoff, WD. et al. (2012) Political and economic aspects of the transition to universal health coverage. The Lancet. 380 924-32. (Requires registration)

Universal health coverage is a goal that can be realized in different ways. This paper describes how countries are pursuing varying approaches that depend on country-specific conditions such as levels of economic growth, changing demographics, technology adoption and political environment. It is argued that successful UHC programs equally require sound technical financing choices and skilled navigation of these national, contextual factors.



Further Reading

World Health Organization. The world health report 2000. Health systems: improving performance. Geneva: WHO Press. (1,686KB, PDF)

Ambitious and contentious, this report undertakes the challenge of producing an analytic, country-by-country ranking of the world's health systems. While debate continues today on both the methodology and the results, this document's status as a milestone in global health policy is undisputed.

Buse, K. et al. (2023). Making health policy. 3rd Edition. McGraw Hill (Book)

Arguably the best current textbook on public policy for healthcare, this book is highly relevant for both policymakers and students of health policy.

Emanuel, EJ. (2020). Which country has the world's best health care? Hachette. (Book)

An insightful and readable account of the health systems of eleven countries that draws relevant lessons for any country undertaking health reform for better value.

Smith, PC. et al (2020). Policy Brief 37. Building on value-based health care : Towards a health system perspective. WHO, European Observatory on Health Systems and Policy. (1,811KB, PDF)

An expanded version of the Health Policy article containing policy recommendations on system-wide approaches to value-based healthcare..

Full text links accessed 8 September 2025.