

The Risks of Managing Uncertainty: the limitations of control and the potential for trust in healthcare institutions

Governance and regulation of risk are growing and yet increasingly criticised phenomena of late-modernity. Crises of legitimacy, economy, motivation and (above all) risk are seen to pose serious dilemmas for governments and regulatory agencies. Understandably, institutions seek to ward against these crises through control mechanisms, yet such governance is often both financially costly and flawed.

This paper investigates some of these limitations – arguing that attempts at exercising control over transactions have an inherent tendency towards dysfunction. Partly this is due to the internal logic of governance which privileges minimising reputational risk of the institution over wider risks facing society. Equally problematic is the way control mechanisms (surveillance and monitoring) modify the way members of institutions relate to each other and to clients. Control and trust influence each other in a dialectical fashion – where increasing attempts at control undermine altruistic trust and social capital. This in turn changes the nature of transactions within and around the institution, limiting the relevance and effectiveness of control mechanisms. The paper draws on case studies from the English National Health Service, arguing that ‘good governance’ must seek to facilitate trust and promote inclusion, consultation and ownership if it is to be effective and efficient.

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