

Lord Byng Elementary School's Japanese Rock Garden and Health Care decision making

Working as a health policy analyst I am often required to explain how health care decisions are arrived at. In the playground of the Lord Byng Elementary School in Steveston there is a Rock Garden that originates from Kyoto, Japan. Fifteen rocks have been placed in the garden. Some of the rocks are always hidden from view. A teacher at the school between 1926 – 1942, Hydo Hyodo Shimizu donated the Rock Garden to the school so that her Japanese-Canadian students understood that “not all things are visible to the eye but are known to the heart.”

This Rock Garden is symbolic of how the Canadian health system functions. Let us imagine that we were to place several stakes in different parts of the playground. We then asked representatives of the medical profession, teaching hospitals, community hospitals, Regional and Provincial Health Authorities and the Ministry of Health to hold onto a stake and count the rocks they see in the Rock Garden and describe them. At a meeting called to discuss the number and type of rocks in the Rock Garden each stakeholder would have

their own view of the precise number of rocks and what they look like. The record of such health care committees arriving at a working consensus without creating various subterranean political agendas is not very good.

It would not be unusual for a stakeholder to hire a consultant to determine the number of rocks in the Rock Garden prior to going to the committee meeting. Let us imagine the situation where the stakeholder who sees 11 rocks hires a consultant.

The way consultants present their recommendation is dependent upon the methodology they adopt. Some consultants may adopt the methodology of standing on the shoulders of their client and counting the rocks. After repeating such an exercise three times the consultant could take the average and may report that there are 11 plus or minus 1.7 rocks in the Rock Garden.

Another consultant may walk around the Rock Garden and randomly stop seven times to count the rocks that are visible. Taking the average of the numbers counted the consultant would arrive at a

number to present to the stakeholder. The more academically inclined consultant could measure the surface area of the rocks that are visible and present a “weighted” average. Canadian health administration glows in the benediction it perceives through academic exercise.

The more high tech consultant would take a satellite picture of the playground and present a number that could be verified with a P value of less than 0.05.

Often when consultants present their findings to their clients, the number is not what the client wants. Under such circumstances, and recognizing the possibility of acquiring repeat business, a consultant may be tempted to say, “What number do you want?”

In the absence of any market discipline there is often conspiracy that can lead to chaos.

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