

## **Scenario Planning and the Medical Humanities: Envisioning the Futures of Health and Healthcare**

### **Abstract**

In conditions of turbulence, uncertainty, novelty and ambiguity, traditional models of prediction struggle to keep pace. Scenario planning offers an alternative approach grounded in plausible storytelling rather than linear forecasting. This commentary revisits the use of scenario planning within healthcare and explores its relevance to the medical humanities as both a strategic and creative practice. Scenarios are not predictions but carefully constructed descriptions of imagined futures that invite reflection on how broader factors shape the future of health and healthcare, challenging current understandings and received wisdom.

Drawing on the Oxford Scenario Planning Approach and its recent applications with health and care institutions, this commentary argues that scenario work functions as a form of creative collective inquiry. It enables practitioners, educators and researchers to think imaginatively about uncertainty, challenge entrenched assumptions and investigate complex or emerging dilemmas. As a narrative and aesthetic exercise, it also draws on core methods of the humanities to expand the ways we imagine healthcare futures.

By situating scenario planning within the broader field of the humanities, this commentary highlights its potential to foster dialogue between strategy and scholarship, between evidence and imagination. In doing so, it proposes that scenario planning can enrich both the theory and practice of the medical humanities, helping us to envision not one future for health, but many.

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Though it's just a trick of the calendar, the arrival of a new year turns our thoughts to the future. Yet we cannot gather data from events that haven't happened yet, and forecasts drawing on precedent can flounder when situations are unstable.

Under conditions of turbulence, uncertainty, novelty, and ambiguity [1], it becomes impossible to say what tomorrow will bring based on experiences and models drawn from the past. In these circumstances, the humanities have a special gift to offer decision-makers at all levels.

Narrative descriptions of contrasting, plausible futures, or "scenarios" [2], can provide the basis for wise decision-making under conditions of uncertainty [3, 4]. They are among several approaches which have evolved to address such conditions, including futures literacy [5] and causal layered analysis [6].

The criterion for good scenario planning is not whether it predicts events correctly or outlines a desired, normative state of affairs. Rather, scenarios test plausibility [7] by exploring alternatives to current assumptions about what is going on around us and how situations might unfold – thus creating permission to imagine, and enact, different possibilities in the present.

This requires skills closely aligned with the arts and humanities. Beyond dystopia or utopia, scenario planning challenges us to imagine and describe issues and dynamics outside of currently held hopes, fears, and expectations. Ramírez and Wilkinson, devisers of the Oxford Scenario Planning Approach, draw on the words of novelist Carlos Fuentes to compare scenarios to literature: “a verbal search for that which awaits being written.” [1]

An attitude of epistemic humility encourages us to venture into the unknowable realm of things which haven’t happened yet, and regard the present from the novel vantage point of manufactured hindsight: What are we missing, from our limited perspective in the here-and-now? If the future were to play out *otherwise to expectations*, how would health and care themselves be defined, and who would be involved in addressing them? How would the inhabitants of each future retrospectively judge our situation today, our choices, and our values?

Scenarios have been used by a range of healthcare institutions for a variety of purposes. United European Gastroenterology employed scenarios to examine education priorities. Students entering medical school in 2014 would be halfway through their careers by 2040, so how well would their education serve them in a range of possible futures? Understanding gastroenterology’s future required exploration of changing lifestyles and agrifood systems, as well as medicine and healthcare. [8]

During the Covid-19 pandemic, new forms of scenario planning evolved to suit the needs of users experiencing exceptionally fast-moving uncertainty [9]. At the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN), scenarios produced in 2021-2022 enabled a diverse group of organizations involved in the fight against infectious disease to come together on the common ground of an unwritten future. Looking ahead to 2030, they explored challenging contexts in which the nature of international collaboration and the scope of public health emergencies varied widely. [10]

Gail Carson, then Chair of GOARN, also contributed to the European Commission-funded IMAJINE project, whose four scenarios told of worlds in which Europeans experienced new kinds of inequality shaped by climate change, digital technology, and shifting geopolitical dynamics. In her view,

The hit of the pandemic showed up all the weaknesses of the system [...] Looking at these scenarios can identify systemic weaknesses before we have to endure the next hit; doing that work of identification and early intervention would be an honourable thing to do. [11]

Scenarios are grounded in the needs of a specific user and purpose; they aim to challenge mental models and to help users to re-perceive their context. This includes unlearning as much as learning, that is, “letting go or relaxing the rigidities of previously held assumptions and beliefs, rather than forgetting them.” [12]

The “a-ha” moment in which scenarios challenge the validity of an existing mental model [13] can be discomfoting, for, as Bion reminds us,

being aware of reality may involve being aware of the unpleasant because reality is not necessarily pleasing or welcome. [...] To dare to be aware of the facts of the universe in which we are existing calls for courage. [14]

Aesthetics play as much of a role as reason in making this courageous step beyond received wisdom [15]. Scenario planning is a creative process which embodies, in Van der Heijden’s phrase [16], “the art of strategic conversation” by convening interdisciplinary spaces for diverse actors to imaginatively explore uncertainty together, resisting “colonization of the future” by powerful interests [1].

Different scenario projects may produce different outputs as required to help users re-perceive their context: audio-visual materials, extensive reports, performances, roleplays, interactive installations, or simply a succinct and evocative turn of phrase. As the poet and scenario planner Betty Sue Flowers notes: “If you can find the right image for a story you need to tell, knowing that leaders are very busy and don’t have time to read academic prose, then those leaders can recreate their own story from that particular image.” [17]

These outputs can be considered as art-objects, as theorised by Alfred Gell [18, 19]: vessels for the shared and delegated agency of those involved in their construction. In this way, a vibrant strategic conversation can live on beyond its initial moment and reach more widely. Such outputs must be constructed with care and rigour, but can be subsequently adapted to different users and settings post-publication [20].

As Calvino put it,

Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a function. Since science has begun to distrust general explanations that are not sectorial and specialized, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various ‘codes,’ into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world. [21]

Scenario work, pushing the limits of what we believe might transpire, encouraging us to address relationality in times of uncertainty, in its highest form strives for this kind of literary art – both in process and outputs.

It is the new year, and turbulent times are upon us; it is the hour to come together and rewrite our stories of what the future might hold, expanding our understanding of the here-and-now, seeing beyond the blinkers of our fears, assumptions, and even our hopes, being truly bold and creative in the face of the unknown.

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