

Title

Who Gets a Bed? Hospital Regulation, Technological Governance, and the Politics of Survival in Brazil's Public Health System

Abstract

This paper examines the hospital bed as a political technology in Brazil's Unified Health System (SUS). Instead of seeing hospital infrastructure as neutral in epidemic response, it follows how beds, protocols, referral systems, transport decisions, isolation procedures, and clinical classifications served as tools of governance during disease crises in Minas Gerais, Brazil. The research draws on 50 oral history interviews with doctors, nurses, and administrative staff at Hospital Eduardo de Menezes, a state reference hospital for infectious diseases in Belo Horizonte. Interviewees were selected to capture a range of roles and experiences across various epidemic responses from the 1980s to the 2020s. The interviews were conducted in Portuguese, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic coding to identify patterns in decision-making and the use of hospital infrastructure. The study also uses institutional documents on epidemics such as yellow fever, H1N1, Ebola preparedness, and COVID-19. Together, these materials show that "getting a bed" was never simply a logistical act. It was a sociotechnical process. Scarcity, urgency, risk, expertise, and public responsibility all played roles in turning decisions about survival into practice.

The paper adds to the history of technology by turning the focus from standout medical devices to ordinary tools of coordination. Drawing on key theoretical frameworks from Science and Technology Studies (STS), particularly the concept of sociotechnical systems, as well as the tradition of biopolitics in public health, the analysis situates hospital beds and related technologies within broader debates about governance and power in medicine. These include forms, protocols, phone calls, ambulances, triage categories, regulation systems, and the work needed to use them. In Brazil's public health system, these technologies did more than carry out policy. They made policy happen in practice. By viewing the hospital bed as an artifact in political and moral choices, the paper asks how public health technologies govern life at the edge of institutional limits and engages with established academic debates about the politics of health infrastructure.

Short pitch

The hospital bed is treated as political technology. Infectious disease response in Brazil's SUS shows how protocols, triage, and regulation turned scarcity into care and survival decisions. While research on health infrastructure has often focused on high-income countries or on singular moments of crisis, this study situates Brazil within a broader conversation about how states worldwide contend with resource limitations, governance logics, and moral dilemmas in public health. By comparing the Brazilian case to international debates and experiences, the analysis highlights both shared challenges and distinctive solutions that contribute to the global understanding of hospital infrastructure as a tool of governance.

Keywords

History of technology; public health; hospital infrastructure; SUS; Brazil; regulation; epidemic response; medical technology; governance; scarcity.