Around the world, CEOs and senior managers of healthcare systems are asking themselves how best to deal with the challenges of today’s rapidly changing healthcare landscape. The solutions they opt for must be solidly grounded on fundamental values that will guide future practices, decisions, and standards.

The increase in human health risks, epitomized in recent years by the outbreaks of influenza A(H1N1) and SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), underlines the urgent need to connect strategic thinking on health with management processes in a globalized world. To make this connection, we believe it is essential that health systems strive for transparency as a fundamental value.

Achieving Transparency through Value-Driven Business Process Management

Value-driven business process management (VBPM) is a management concept that uses process as the critical link to translate business strategy into execution. One of the greatest benefits of implementing VBPM is its ability to deliver an incremental gain in transparency.

According to Peter Franz and Mathias Kirchmer, authors of *Value-Driven Business Process Management: The Value-Switch for Lasting Competitive Advantage*, transparency is central to any type of organization because “only an organization that has a shared understanding of its processes can start reflecting on better ways to design and operate them” [1]. Transparency is also a key value for the healthcare sector. A study by PricewaterhouseCoopers [6] asked more than 700 health leaders in 27 countries
around the world how they would rate the importance of transparency in quality and pricing information to a sustainable health system. More than half of those leaders replied that it was “very important.”

However, in a complex, highly dynamic, specialized, and multidisciplinary sector like healthcare, transparency is unlikely to be achieved without the right tools or if it is resisted by the organizational culture. One of the challenges facing senior health system decision makers is therefore to generate corporate strategies that will drive transparency in their organizational cultures as well as their processes. Achieving transparency as a genuine value rather than a simple requirement can be accomplished through a strategic plan that progresses step by step, case by case, and hospital by hospital.

**Turning Black Boxes into Glass Boxes**

Process mining, a set of techniques for the automatic discovery of processes, is one of the most promising methodologies for achieving transparency.

In his book “*Process Mining: Discovery, Conformance and Enactment of Business Processes*,” Wil M. P. van der Aalst shows how this approach has successfully brought transparency to the processes of different types of organizations such as banks, local governments, and industrial plants [8]. There are also a variety of experiences on record in which process mining has been applied in healthcare settings to identify where a process begins, what decisions were taken, and where the process ends.

In a case study at the Academic Medical Center (AMC) of the University of Amsterdam, a group of researchers from the Eindhoven University of Technology’s Department of Information Systems found that process mining enabled them to explicitly capture knowledge about a healthcare setting. As they concluded, “we were able to derive understandable models for large groups of patients. This was confirmed by people at the AMC hospital” [4].

In addition, since process mining displays information in a visual format, users can more readily appreciate how processes really occur within their organization. Leonardo Torres, the author of a master’s thesis on process mining in healthcare, has noted that “[the] combination of the techniques (process mining and visual analytics) had a positive effect due to the fact that medical specialists were able to understand the results in an easier way” [7].

Transparency as a value can be realized with the help of newly available tools. But is not simply a matter of the right technology, for it also involves a change in the organizational culture that executes the processes.

**Culture of Transparency versus Culture of Blame**

In the healthcare field, processes that carry a risk of medical errors take on special importance, not least because the issue involves a variety of different stakeholders. “Everybody is concerned with medical errors,” says Silvana Quaglini of the Department of Computers and System Science at the University of Pavia. “Patients are more and more informed and demand medical excellence, healthcare personnel are more and more worried about increasing complaints, and healthcare administrators are worried about waste of resources and increasing insurance fees,” she adds [3].

Most case studies show that the cause of medical errors is more likely to be a chain of events than the act of an isolated individual. This implies that a key step in reducing these errors would be to create a culture of transparency in which the individual is seen as part of a broader social network performing the different tasks that make up the organization’s processes. Making these processes transparent would put an end to the culture of individual blame, with its incessant focus on “individual errors” and excessive supervision of “specific tasks” that so often ends up undermining the basic coordination that is so essential to any work team.

In stark contrast with the blame culture, transparency is synonymous with an overall vision that puts the emphasis on coordinating the flow of tasks as a way of lowering the likelihood of errors. Furthermore, by focusing on the process as a whole rather than its individual parts, it promotes a sense of responsibility at the team level. In other words, with transparency comes the awareness that working as a team is what generates good results.

Achieving transparency is a two-fold learning process that consists in defining and then internalizing knowledge of existing processes. But it also means tackling the much tougher job of actually replacing the individual blame culture with a culture of transparency that puts the accent on the responsibility of the whole medical community for its successes as well as its failures.

**Social BPMas Tool to Drive Organizational Transparency**

Social business process management (social BPM) is a tool that uses social media such as community Web pages, blogs, or on-line social networks to drive
transparency in organizations. As Franz and Kirchmer explain, “Social BPM supports value-driven BPM by gathering and broadcasting the stakeholder input that drives the improvement of existing processes and the design of new ones” [2].

There are two principal ways that social BPM can play a key role in introducing transparency in healthcare settings. One is to use social media to support the process of process management. For example, senior hospital managers can create a center of excellence and use leadership to spur a process-centered culture throughout the organization. To support this initiative they could use a knowledge portal where medical staff document best practices that have contributed to attaining transparency and excellence in service provision. Or they could utilize YouTube to announce new policies or procedures instead of printing and distributing hundreds of memorandums. Social BPM would then be contributing to the governance of processes through a visible and effective communications system.

The other way social BPM can play a central role in introducing transparency is through the use of social media tools to deliver process improvements and transparency in operating procedures. In human resources, for example, professional and personal networks such as LinkedIn or Xing could be employed to find new hospital staff or specialized personnel. In day-to-day operations, another option is Yammer, a sort of Twitter for businesses, to facilitate communication and work activities both inside and outside the hospital. Also highly useful are blogs where patients can actively describe their experience as users. This in turn would provide inputs for continuous improvement of care-flows. Finally, the use of Facebook or WhatsApp by patients can expand their support networks, a proven success factor in the holistic treatment of certain illnesses.

Thus, social BPM is all about developing the use of social communication tools and feedback between stakeholders. In this sense, process transparency and improvement are also partly the result of shared and socially distributed experience.

Transparency Must Be Goal
It has been more than 28 years since Harvard Business School professor Michael Porter first discovered that value chains are part of a larger value system and that the links between activities are what add value to an organization [5]. Yet transparency has yet to be visualized as a value of central importance. The goal of the health sector must be to achieve transparency as a value by exploiting its organizational strengths and applying technologies that can uncover processes. In this effort, health system CEOs and senior managers will find a valuable ally in value-driven business process management, for knowledge of processes is the key to achieving a virtuous organizational culture that is able to execute processes of excellence.

Author Information
Mathias Kirchmer is an Affiliated Faculty Member at the University of Pennsylvania and former Managing Director for Business Process Management (BPM) at Accenture and IDS Scheer.

Sigifredo Laengle is a professor in the Department of Management Control and Information Systems at the University of Chile, and is also the institution’s Academic Director of Executive Education Diplomas in Business Process Management and Process Mining. Email: slaengle@fen.uchile.cl.

Víctor Masías is a consultant in organizational development for BPM projects at the University of Chile and the Diego Portales University. Email: vmasias@fen.chile.cl.

Acknowledgment
This work was partially supported by the Faculty of Economics and Business, Universidad Diego Portales, Manuel Rodríguez Sur 253, 8370057, Santiago, Chile.

References