Agile, a guiding principle for health care improvement?
- an integrative literature review

Sara Tolf1, Monica E. Nyström1,2, Carol Tishelman1,3, Mats Brommels1 and Johan Hansson1

1) Department of Learning, Informatics, Management and Ethics (LIME), Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden, 2) Department of Public Health and Clinical Medicine, Epidemiology and Global Health, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden, 3) Innovation Center, Karolinska University Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden

From continuity to discontinuity
For hospitals to better handle the increasingly turbulent environment, the strategic management must shift their assumptions of continuity and a focus on operations to discontinuity and a focus on adaptive capacities. This enables improving existing care processes, as well as creating new ones, reflecting the needs of service users.

To meet this need, the strategic management of hospitals need to use reactive strategies to be prepared for the unpredictable, proactive strategies to foresee and impact future situations, and embracive strategies for transboundary integration.

This study concludes that by combining agile strategic thinking with lean operational management, a hospital may develop care structures and processes that fulfill both short and long term needs of service users.

Background
Development initiatives within Swedish hospitals (e.g. lean) have principally addressed improvement of internal processes. Less emphasis has been put on developing the strategic ability of a hospital management to interpret and act on environmental changes.

Aim
To deepen our understanding of the concept agile and its potential for strategic hospital management to optimize the design of organizational structures and processes.

Method
An integrative review including articles that 1) define agile, 2) describe agile capacities and 3) describe agile on multiple organizational levels. In total, 60 articles from various fields of research were included in the final analysis.

Findings and future research
Agile is placed at the intersection between the organisation and the external environment. Five capacities for organizational agility were identified (Figure 1). Agile and lean strategies have different, but complementary, objectives (Figure 2). In our future research, we aim to study how hospitals combine these objectives to achieve better care.

Practical implications
Our conceptualization of agile in the health care context, and in relation to lean, can help the strategic hospital management to assess and improve their ability to survive in a discontinuous environment and better meet the needs of service users.