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## Putting our own message into practice: Lessons from previous work on knowledge exchange in social care

Blog Editor

*Here at the Social Care Evidence in Practice (SCEiP) project we have been highlighting how social care research all too often can fail to make an impact on the real world and, at worst, can be left unloved on dusty shelves. In these cash-strapped days, it's especially important to make the most of research that already exists as well as developing the evidence base where gaps are visible. And this is no less true in our own field of endeavour – working to understand what contributes to successful knowledge exchange between researchers, practitioners and policymakers. 'Knowledge exchange' may be the vogue phrase of the moment, but it's hardly a new concept. So we don't want to find ourselves retreading old ground in the work we're doing at SCEiP. Is there, for instance, useful past research on the knowledge exchange process that hasn't properly seen the light of day?*

We're happy to say 'yes' and are now publishing two very helpful new papers produced from the project, '[Learning from Others: Knowledge Transfer in Social Care Research](#)', funded by the London School of Economics and Political Science's Higher Education Innovation Fund between May 2009 and July 2011: '[Evidence-informed policy making: Exploring the concept of knowledge transfer in social care](#)'; '[Knowledge transfer in social care and social work: Where is the problem?](#)'. In partnership with the [Social Care Institute for Excellence](#), the project aimed to improve links between research bodies and social care organisations, users, practitioners, carers and policy makers. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? And many of the themes identified by this earlier project resonate strongly with SCEiP's work to date.

First up is agreement that a static term like 'knowledge transfer' fails to capture the two-way – and often complex and "messy" – process of transferring research knowledge into action in the context of social care. Indeed 'interactive' was the word that came up repeatedly during the authors' discussions with researchers and policymakers, and in reviews of existing literature. Far better to talk of 'knowledge exchange', the two papers agree.

Misconceptions can often get in the way of constructive relationships between researchers and policymakers or practitioners. The paper on knowledge exchange and policy making mentions how researchers, in particular, tend to believe that policy decisions are largely based on scientific evidence – when the reality of policy making is that research evidence is just one of several sources of information, and that any decision making takes place within the social and political climate of the day. Similarly, the paper on knowledge exchange and social workers (itself a review of existing evidence in this field) shows how individual practitioners draw on a range of resources when determining what action to take and that research evidence may conflict with professional judgment in the context of complex lives. Types of 'knowledge' valued 'on the ground' by social care practitioners are highly variable, and research evidence must compete with local, organisational and experiential knowledge. In particular, different players may dispute the value of change.

Many of the findings echo what practitioners have told SCEiP: "Social care research is rarely entirely fit for the purposes of application, either by individuals or by organisations. It is underfunded (in the UK) and may not address the most pressing practice issues. Research results may not appear, at least to practitioners, to be generalisable: local and organisational 'fit' and feasibility may be contested".

Particularly importantly, the evidence shows that research "will often need to be synthesised, translated and negotiated with end users if it is to have any influence. Researchers may not be very good at conceptualising, theorising and applying knowledge brokering, considering what is useful to practice and how demand from practitioners can be fostered". This is an area where SCEiP is putting considerable effort.

The work with social care policy makers identifies some key messages for a proactive approach to improving knowledge exchange between the worlds of research and policy, many of which will sound familiar to those of you following SCEiP's work:

- Integrating knowledge transfer activities into a research design in order to achieve better time and resource efficiency;
- Involving target audience(s) and other relevant stakeholders from the start of the project;

- Developing incentives for social care researchers to engage more actively in the process of knowledge transfer;
- Recognising a lack of research evidence in the social care field as one of the main challenges in knowledge transfer;
- Focusing not only on the transfer of evidence but also on research utilisation as a way of putting evidence into action;
- Emphasising the importance of the relationships between researchers and policy makers in the decision making processes; this includes better understanding of each other's needs, constraints, and priorities;
- Developing better understanding of the whole process of policy making;
- Improving and nurturing working relationships between social care researchers and policy makers;
- Engaging the relevant funding bodies in the process of knowledge transfer.

The review of research with practitioners makes the important point that the impact of knowledge transfer on social care practice is notoriously difficult to evaluate in terms of its impact on end users – not that this should stop us trying. One interesting question is whether knowledge is best 'imposed' on staff in the form of mandatory policies and protocols, or will have more impact if negotiated with staff in more discursive ways. The review concludes that training is probably the most common mechanism by which knowledge is spread throughout the sector, particularly if training is an ongoing process and engagement includes the development of tools perceived as useful for practice.

As with policy makers, the review finds that best practice in knowledge transfer with practitioners may require involvement of those practitioners in choosing research topics relevant to practice; promoting generalisability of findings by selecting representative or 'difficult' contexts; and involving knowledge users in knowledge production and in making findings more accessible and relevant.

The challenge now for is for us all to work out what types of relationship, supporting infrastructure, brokerage and/or lines of communication between research, policy and practitioners will be the most productive – for all parties.

### Full papers

Matosevic T, McDaid D, Knapp M, Rutter D, Fisher M (2013) *Evidence-informed Policy Making: Exploring the Concept of Knowledge Transfer in Social Care*, PSSRU Discussion Paper 2862, Personal Social Services Research Unit, London; <http://www.pssru.ac.uk/archive/pdf/dp2862.pdf>

Rutter D, Fisher M (2013) *Knowledge Transfer in Social Care and Social Work: Where is the Problem?* PSSRU Discussion Paper 2866, Personal Social Services Research Unit, London; <http://www.pssru.ac.uk/archive/pdf/dp2866.pdf>

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