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Bridging the 'gap' between research and practice: Exploring methods

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We recently embarked on the Social Care Evidence in Practice project to find effective methods of knowledge exchange that will engage those researching social care practices with those who use the research in practice. One of our first activities was a one day 'unconference' on 19 October 2012 to set the agenda for this project.

As organisers we (PSSRU at LSE, SSCR and ripfa) were anxious about such a purposely unstructured workshop, but we knew we had to address two things:

1. The ways in which research can be passed into practice and vice versa
2. The key practice questions where research evidence could provide answers.

This is my first post as the coordinator of the project and here I am focusing on the discussions that took place on methods. The unconference was my first event at LSE and it was great to see so many people, from local authorities to researchers getting so involved in the different discussions going on around the room. For me the quote of day was the '*need to take research from its commissioning level to the everyday question of how can I help Mrs Jones*'.

The reasoning behind the project

Many social care practitioners want to utilise research findings to improve practice and initiate innovative responses to everyday practice issues. However although the 'will' may be there- time, space and access constraints have made it difficult for practitioners to access relevant research.

Innovative methods of communication are needed to bridge the gap between the commissioning of research and its practical application to deliver key research messages in a way that works for practitioners. In order for research to be applied and have an impact on practice, it must be available to the vast array of stakeholders providing adult social care.

Dr Mike Clark of the NIHR School for Social Care Research believes that personal and organisational responsibility is key in getting research into practice; '*researchers have a responsibility to understand their key audience and think better about the means of communication for that audience. Social care has a responsibility to create the right culture, management processes and infrastructure to allow practitioners to take note of evidence and bring that into the decision making process – we must take note of the evidence relevant to practice*'.

Benefits of research dissemination

There are opportunities that present themselves in communication between researchers and practitioners, which the discussions picked up on;

- For practitioners, the main benefit of using research in practice is that it aids the development of innovative practice methods, and can be especially effective when tackling practice issues as and when they arise.
- For researchers, networking with practitioners can shed light on topical and timely issues that could increase the impact of their research, and can allow them to ensure that their research is rationally applied.

Challenges

However in getting research into practice, both groups face challenges due to;

- Resistance from key stakeholders
- Access restrictions to key information
- The different 'mindsets' present in social care practice and research that may lead to communication difficulties

Key methods

During the unconference we asked our delegates to consider what methods were needed to facilitate networking and research dissemination across the sector.

- In the long term there was a call for **strategic partnerships**, with researchers working closely with local authorities and care providers to look at what research is needed and how this can be communicated
- Methods such as **shadowing and paired mentoring** were proposed as opportunities for researchers and practitioners to 'walk in each other's shoes'
- In recent years, **social media** has become a key resource for communicating and finding key information. And although it has been raised that there may be restriction issues for practitioner's, current resources such as the **Mental Elf App** were noted as having been successful in disseminating research in way that translates well into practice
- Although key research cannot be condensed down to a 140 character tweet, it can be turned into snap shots, **digests and summaries** that can be channelled via many forums. Participants suggested these summaries could be provided in **email alerts** and online websites in the form of text **newsletters** and bulletin posts or converted into **podcasts** and YouTube **videos**.
- **Short updates** could be provided throughout the research process, allowing people to keep up to date with it as it happens, and influence the way it is communicated to its key audiences. For organisations this may be an opportunity to get their practitioners engaged with the research agenda.
- It is important in this process to create, and allow for, effective networking opportunities. It was suggested **research/information sharing fairs**, workshops and breakfast and **lunchtime seminars** could provide researchers and practitioners with opportunities to meet those who share similar topical interests that can be beneficial to both parties
- In order to introduce or effectively maintain evidence-led practice, organisations or practice settings could look to running **journal/research groups**, alongside time restricted projects. This may allow researchers to attend practitioner settings to discuss findings and debate their practical implications.

Establishing networks between these two groups will be crucial in aiding information dissemination and creating a mindfulness of research in practice. We must also aim to harness the wealth of practitioner views and experiences in the creation of future research agendas, and the expertise of researchers in understanding what the evidence says works in practice.

Next steps...

In the next 10 months we aim to trial any or all of the methods suggested and we are still open to new ideas. To receive key updates on the project please subscribe via our RSS feed or email subscription. Alternatively, feel free to leave a comment or email the project team with any comments or queries. We welcome any and all levels of engagement and are open to suggestions from anyone who would like to see the project address any specific practice questions and/or methods.

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