

Improving Communication between Primary Care Researchers and Decision Makers

*A Project funded by the
Canadian Health Services Research Foundation*

Results of Focus Groups with:

**Health Service Executives and Administrators
Ministry Staff
Local Politicians**

and Semi-Structured Interviews with Media

May 2000

Project Members:

May Cohen
Chair, Primary Care Council, Hamilton-Wentworth District Health Council

Cheryl Levitt, Michelle Gold, Phyllis Jensen, Tina Karwalajtys
Department of Family Medicine, McMaster University

Marion Emo
Hamilton-Wentworth District Health Council

Tom Abernathy
Central West Planning Information Network

Jane George
previous affiliation: Advancement Office
Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University

For more information contact:
*Tina Karwalajtys
Department of Family Medicine
McMaster University
(905) 521-2100, ext 76189*

Improving Communication Between Primary Care Researchers and Policy Makers

The goal of this project is to develop a sustainable infrastructure to foster an information partnership between local and regional health care decisionmakers and the Department of Family Medicine at McMaster University.

The project is organised in four phases with the following objectives::

1. to identify a list of decisionmakers and media personnel who are potential target audiences for primary care research information;
2. to conduct a needs assessment with identified decisionmakers and media personnel;
3. to develop a workshop to train primary care researchers to more effectively communicate their research findings to decisionmakers and the media;
4. to enhance existing information infrastructure systems within the Department of Family Medicine to improve access and timeliness of primary care research for decisionmakers and media.

In May 2000, we identified health services executives and administrators, local politicians and provincial government officials who are potential users of primary care research and conducted focus groups with them in order to understand their experience with primary care researchers; and to learn what strategies would be beneficial for them in order to improve research uptake in the decision-making process.

We also identified and conducted key informant interviews with local media personnel: newspaper, broadcast and trade journalists to understand how to improve our communication of research findings with them. We systematically analysed this information using NUD*IST qualitative research software and prepared a report identifying key themes and issues.

The project group has now completed phases one and two and is currently developing a workshop for primary health care researchers in order to improve awareness of research transfer issues and enhance communication strategies to better communicate with the media and decisionmakers. The workshop content is being developed in response to the needs identified through the interviews and focus groups which were conducted in May 2000. Findings from the interviews and focus groups are presented herein.

Our workshop, "Getting Your Research Off the Shelf" will take place April 6, 2001 in Hamilton, Ontario.

Findings from Focus Groups and Key Informant Interviews

AWARENESS OF PRIMARY CARE

Focus group participants (health care executives, Ministry of Health staff, politicians and media personnel) were selected on the presumption that they were all involved with primary care information. All participants initially identified primary care to be an ambiguous topic - and they requested clarification as to its parameters, so as to best respond to questions posed during the interviews. Participants consistently asked the facilitator to define the field for them.

Can you define primary health care a little more? Are you basically talking a family doctor? How far do you go?

Yes. Family physician. Front line.

How far does front line go?

Local Politician

Does everyone know what primary health care is? What are you looking for?

Health Care CEO

What kind of stories have you recently done on primary care?

...I don't cover health policy, so I've done almost nothing... Normally when I hear that, I think of primary care reform.

...You don't have to focus on that. Just primary care in general...

Right, you mean like a team approach to delivering care?

Journalist - National Newspaper

What kinds of stories have you recently done on primary care?

..the whole Walkerton outbreak... I've done things like prostate. Cancer... I'm assuming this is all connected to primary care?

Television Health Reporter

Executives and Ministry staff ultimately defined health services delivery as their fundamental focus within primary care; as this related most directly to their working life. Local politicians also identified health services delivery to be a relevant descriptor for primary care, giving examples of recent community events, such as closure of hospitals and shortages of family physicians as issues they had responded to. In

addition, politicians considered the broad category of population health to be within the purview of primary care, and in particular, environmental and social aspects of health, given the concerns of their constituents.

The media perspective on primary care encapsulated all topics on clinical care, health care delivery and policy, to the extent that it reflected viewer or reader interest.

Therefore, it appears that the agenda of primary care at this juncture in time, is not well articulated and there is a lack of consensus as to its parameters, given the sample of people we interviewed. Nonetheless, participants demonstrated that they were able to define their perception of this diverse field, within the boundaries of their stakeholder relationship to primary care.

WHAT TYPES OF INFORMATION DO DECISION-MAKERS REQUIRE?

Stakeholders' desire for primary care information to support decision-making is intimately tied with *the political realities of the decision-making process*. Ministry personnel, politicians and executives clearly articulated the context within which research information is desired and utilized.

The biggest difficulty for people in the work that you do it to understand that in fact, logic, truth and evidence are far less important and far less significant than political reality. And the politics of the decision-making are the piece that those people who do not sit in government rarely understand...the average local politician does not go out and seek out research. I used to, on topics, and I'll admit it, that were pet topics of mine... I'd seek it out as a way of bolstering an argument...

Local Politician

I'd like to comment on your questions about the ability to use the data. From a political perspective, it really depends on who is in the minister's office...

Ministry Staff

Notwithstanding, decision-makers indicated that

- relevance
- credibility
- timeliness and
- improved access to both researchers and their findings

would enable them to improve their utilization of primary care research within the scope of their decision-making role.

DECISION-MAKERS CURRENT EXPERIENCE WITH RESEARCH

Role of Staff

Executives, ministry personnel and local politicians consistently highlighted the importance of their staff as their primary source for receiving research information.

I would say our staff is the number one source of what is going on

I rely on our staff to access it for us.

Executives

I actually am the Minister's policy staff. I have a number of different policy files that I work with... My responsibility is to provide advice to the minister, from a policy and a political perspective.

Ministry Personnel

I can say on health issues... credible staff and staff that politicians have trust in have, in my experience, been influential...

Trusted staff concurring with research findings and sort of jumping and saying, "This is really important."

Politicians

Relevance

Health services executives identified problems accessing research information due to a lack of material relevant to their needs. These decision-makers called for a research agenda or roundtable to be set up to define relevant research issues for future funding.

Perhaps researchers have a role to draw together the players and force the system to determine what are the relevant questions.

We need a clearinghouse to identify research priorities.

Research questions need to consider the condition, the need for information... Those with power and influence and the resources can always articulate their questions.

The user is critical. They have different questions.

Executives

When research was available, the implications of findings was frequently lacking, imbedded in overly lengthy reports; or indecipherable due to language. Moreso, decision-makers lamented their inability to know how to contact researchers to clarify or discuss the research they encountered.

But what do the results mean? Researchers must speak to the validity of the research. It's interesting to get the results but help me understand what to do with it.

Health Care Executive

Lack of Canadian Content

All decision-makers pointed to a lack of accessible research pertaining to health care delivery within the Canadian context.

There's gaps and I don't know if it's because the information is just not there being researched as we speak; or if it's in the plan... I could not find that information easily. Particularly Canadian, Ontario... The internet is fabulous for primary care but nothing Ontario, nothing, almost nothing Canadian.

Ministry staff

There's a problem – there's no common database, we're dealing with anecdotes and stories.

If you go find research, there isn't very much.

Executives

Jargon

Decision-makers indicated when they are able to access research from sources such as the internet and journals, findings are typically written for academic audiences with clinical jargon or obtuse language. They wanted succinct summaries in plain language.

Timeliness

Unpublished reports, commonly referred to as the “grey literature” as well as forthcoming publications, were for the most part not accessible to decision-makers. This appears to be particularly a problem given the necessity of accessing timely information for decision-making.

Role of the Media

Participants acknowledged that the media frequently serves as a preliminary conduit for the communication of new research – which in turn prompts decision-makers to

seek out original sources of research. But the media is not considered a credible source of information in its own right.

Rather, the media's role in the dissemination of information was acknowledged by decision-makers as a political force to contend with. Because the media influence public opinion and health care decision-makers are accountable to the public, it is clear that the media are a major player in directing attention to research; and this role therefore has implications for strategic channelling of information during the research transfer process.

...if the ...report appears on page 1 of The Spectator, you'll bet that almost all those councillors... [will] say, "Oh gee, I better find out something about that."

Local Politician

Do I use the media at all? Is it a n information source? Oh, yes. I mean, everybody scans the media clippings everyday and looks at what's out there. ... The media review we do is more - ah ha! - so this is news today... I don't think anyone uses it as a policy tool. It's strictly to keep us in tune with might be out there, what we didn't know was out there or what the current issue of the day is.

Ministry Staff

The media personnel we interviewed were chosen based on their specialized reporting in the health sector. Given their specialty, the print journalists and broadcaster we spoke to expressed confidence in their ability to utilize various research sources to gather research information. Sources for media to gather information included internet search engines, web sites and journals. In addition, media were frequently sent faxes, e-mails and press releases from pharmaceutical companies of new research studies.

Experience with Researchers

All persons interviewed for our study identified researchers themselves as the most credible source for evidence-based information. However, decision-makers and media personnel indicated that most researchers are poorly prepared for communicating their information. Researchers, they emphasized, have to understand the need to pro-actively convey their research findings to relevant target audiences.

... there are from time to time individual researchers who will notice that there is a particular issue in the press and they will take it upon themselves to call to make sure we're aware of accurate and reliable information that happens to be available... it's phenomenally wonderful ... we will use that information if we have access to it in a timely way

Ministry staff

I now have a sufficient reputation that a lot of doctors in Hamilton call me and tell me, "I've got something coming out."

Reporter

And I think for many scientists, my perception has been that they think that they're there with all this information and people should come to them.

Yes, I agree.

And in reality, They have to be much more active and much more pro active in terms of building relationships with people they think will use their information.

Ministry staff

So, publicity. I mean it's marketing. You better do some marketing and sales. ...Buy me lunch. Have a cup of coffee with me. "We want to come over and talk to you."

And that would be positively received?

For me it would... "I've got an important message that will help you help your constituents."

Politician

They recommended that researchers improve their relationships with target audiences – so as to enhance the research transfer process. More networking – developing relationships. This was identified as a key strategy.

There are different sources, but generally it's the information that we glean in our department about the activities that are going really through the relationships that we have with particular individuals.

Media

[Researchers] have to be much more active and much more, pro active in terms of building relationships with people that they think will use their information. I think the key thing is probably the relationships. Very rarely do scientists decide to build relationships with the government.

Ministry Staff

... we all have a social network as well... So the piece of it is the non-formal connections.

Local Politician

Credibility isn't quite as good a word as relationship. Because not everybody with whom I have a relationship is credible, but everyone with whom I have a relationship, I have a relationship.

Local Politician

Researchers were criticized for their tendency to withhold their research due to ownership issues and an academic model that encourages dissemination through traditional means. The implications of this are that decision-makers are frequently kept from accessing relevant information in a timely manner. This also has consequences for the political context in which research could be used in the decision-making and governance process.

I have a situation that's going on right now where there's a paper being released... and we have no access to that in advance. And after the fact, it's useless to us. We've had to respond with no knowledge. Good, bad or ugly, my minister's going to be expected to quote on it first thing in the morning... after the press have already analyzed it and she's going to have to respond, heads up. But the researchers are adamantly opposed to sharing that information in advance... but if people are so cautious about not releasing it then you're not necessarily going to get the reaction that you're expecting... and politically speaking, we don't know the answers because we haven't seen the research yet.

Ministry staff

While you have to give politicians the information, the results of the research have to be disseminated in a way that will help the politician make political palatable decisions.

Politician

Media personnel and decision-makers told us that with the exception of a minority of researchers who knew how to network – it was exceedingly hard to identify and locate researchers to discuss research information.

...just make us more aware of their presence because I think sometimes difficulty is finding them on short notice.

Journalist, National Newspaper

There is one thing you might keep in mind, is that politicians regard researchers as ivory tower kind of people, out to change people, they sit in their little rooms somewhere and they are not out there where the people are at... be out there and be a face as well as a name.

Politician

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE RESEARCH TRANSFER

The following recommendations to improve research transfer were made by participants in our study.

Relevance

Decision-makers called for the partnering of researchers and users of information to develop a new research agenda in primary health care that could address the health services issues of concern to them.

Perhaps researchers have a role to draw together the players and force the system to determine what are the relevant questions... we need to get the system to spew out what are the relevant questions.

Hospital Board Member

We need a clearinghouse to identify research priorities, to consider the public interest.

Executive Director

I want to mention the idea of a roundtable and the creation of key relevant questions.

Politician

Knowing Who & How to Contact Researchers

Decision makers and media personnel want to know who has expertise in which fields and suggest a directory of how to contact them. It was suggested that both all forms of print communication indicate who to contact for further information and how to do so. Linked email addressed from web site communication was also suggested.

Moreover, they want researchers to understand the need for timely contact and the willingness of researchers to readily to make themselves available to deal with deadlines and urgent questions.

Timely Notice of New Research Developments

Decision-makers and the media want early information on research-in-progress and new research findings. It is the researcher's responsibility to seek out target audiences for their information and a political imperative, if they want their research to be utilized in a decision-making process.

I would like to have a more formalized process in which we can be updated regularly ... we need further work to go on in getting in contact with researchers, particularly new researchers, as well. ...[We need to be] up to speed on what's happening in the department and ... pass that information on to us.

Public Affairs Staff

If you're looking to relevance of research, to what is happening, like... politicians ... that can make decisions... meet with the staff at some fairly senior level, because they have a sense of what the politicians are thinking... researchers have to be responsible.

Politician

Preferred Methods to Communicate in Print

Web sites are a common source for people seeking information today. A well-linked web site with information on whom to contact directly for more information was considered an essential component.

The internet is fabulous for primary care – but nothing in Ontario. Nothing, almost nothing Canadian.

You basically need a web site. There's no web sites in Ontario with primary care research... The web site we say because you don't have the printing time and the people in policy here need the information today.

Ministry Staff

Email is another computer based technology that was frequently mentioned as a preferred method to communicate new research.

I love email... because then I can print out just what I want.

Journalist

...particularly via email... To have regular emails of just a little snippet of information about what's happening or if there are any particular occasions of importance, for instance, if a paper is being published, it's always great for us to get the heads up ahead of time and be prepared for that.

Public Affairs Staff

But the problem with the net is, you've got to know where to look. I mean, there's so much stuff out there. Whose site do you go to? What are you looking for? I think that the net is too big. You may want to talk about electronic mail. You may want to talk about getting information to people.

Politician

Succinct, Plain Language Communication

Decision-makers wanted clear, simple language reports and summaries both in print and through computer technology; understandable explanations of what their research means and the implications for practice.

It is very helpful if there is an executive summary.

Health Care Board Member

We need executive summaries.

Executive

What the research unit does is put out this little one page summaries with facts. Very useful. Things like that are extremely helpful.

Ministry Staff

I think presentations to committees are useful... [but] don't go there with a one hour presentation with all kinds of details. Have a short, succinct, relevant presentation and set some goals as to what it is. Really make it into a bit of a marketing presentation, as much as a research presentation.

Politician

If you want to transmit data to me, one page – 12 to 14 type ... you have to get my attention first and I can't do everything.

Politician

... presenting it in a neat summary because that is what we need to capture our eye, to capture our attention.

Journalist

Just a brief summary. From that point, I'll decide if that's something our viewers would be interested in.

Broadcast Journalist

Improve Networking & Sustain Relationships with Potential Users of Research

Researchers need to identify intended users of their research, pro-actively pursue these relationships and develop on-going partnerships to facilitate the use of evidence in decision-making.

The researchers function is to target people they think would benefit from their results. From researchers to providers, sell it to them in person.

Executive

I don't think a lot of researchers think about ... that they might have information on that which would be of benefit to politicians or policy makers. You know, it's a different approach from the academic approach... Because we will use that information if we have access to it in a timely way... And that's not very often... I think part of it too is relationship building.

Ministry Staff

Explain Concisely

Researchers also need to improve their communication skills during direct, personal contact opportunities – no matter whether these opportunities are with the media, decision-makers or the public.

Media personnel indicated that more work needs to be done to prepare researchers to better communicate in sound bites appropriate for broadcast and print reporting.

What's difficult is that many researchers and doctors are not media savvy. And especially with television and radio. Your information needs to be condensed, short and sweet and right to the point... I've got a minute and thirty to tell a story... they'll talk on and on and on and really you could have summed it up in one short answer.

Broadcast Journalist

Gear your communication to the level of the receiver. I don't mean talking down to them. There are times that I don't understand what they're talking about.

Reporter

Researchers need to describe what their results mean – help me understand what I do, not just for publication.

Hospital Executive

