Getting research evidence into rural health policies: what does it take?

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Introduction

In its simplest form, knowledge translation refers to those activities associated with getting research evidence into the hands of people and organisations in a format they can put to practical use. Without implementation into policies, programs, and practice interventions, much of the evidence produced by rural health researchers is wasted! In order to maximise take-up of evidence into policies and practice, tools are required which enable the research evidence to be gathered and organised in ways useful to the end-user, and with the capacity to gain some measure of its impact.

This paper aims firstly to demonstrate one such tool for recording and monitoring the impact of research, and secondly to show how its use can help maximise the take-up of research evidence into rural health policy and practice.

Conceptual framework for monitoring research impact

Once research findings are published, it is important to ascertain what difference they make in solving important problems or whether they have much impact on the activities of end-users. To assist this quest, investigators from the Centre of Research Excellence in Rural and Remote Primary Health Care (CRERRPHC) developed a framework to monitor the impact of health services research. This framework, published in the Australian Journal of Rural Health[1] in 2012, is summarised below in Table 1, and was used to underpin a new database system that records evidence of uptake and use of the research undertaken by the CRERRPHC. Importantly, this evidence is categorised according to three dimensions:

i.   *the broad area of impact*, distinguishing between its contribution to knowledge generally, or some specific problem relating to the policy arena, service activities or society at large;

ii.   *the key stakeholders* affected by the research – notably consumers, service providers and funders, policymakers, educators or researchers; and

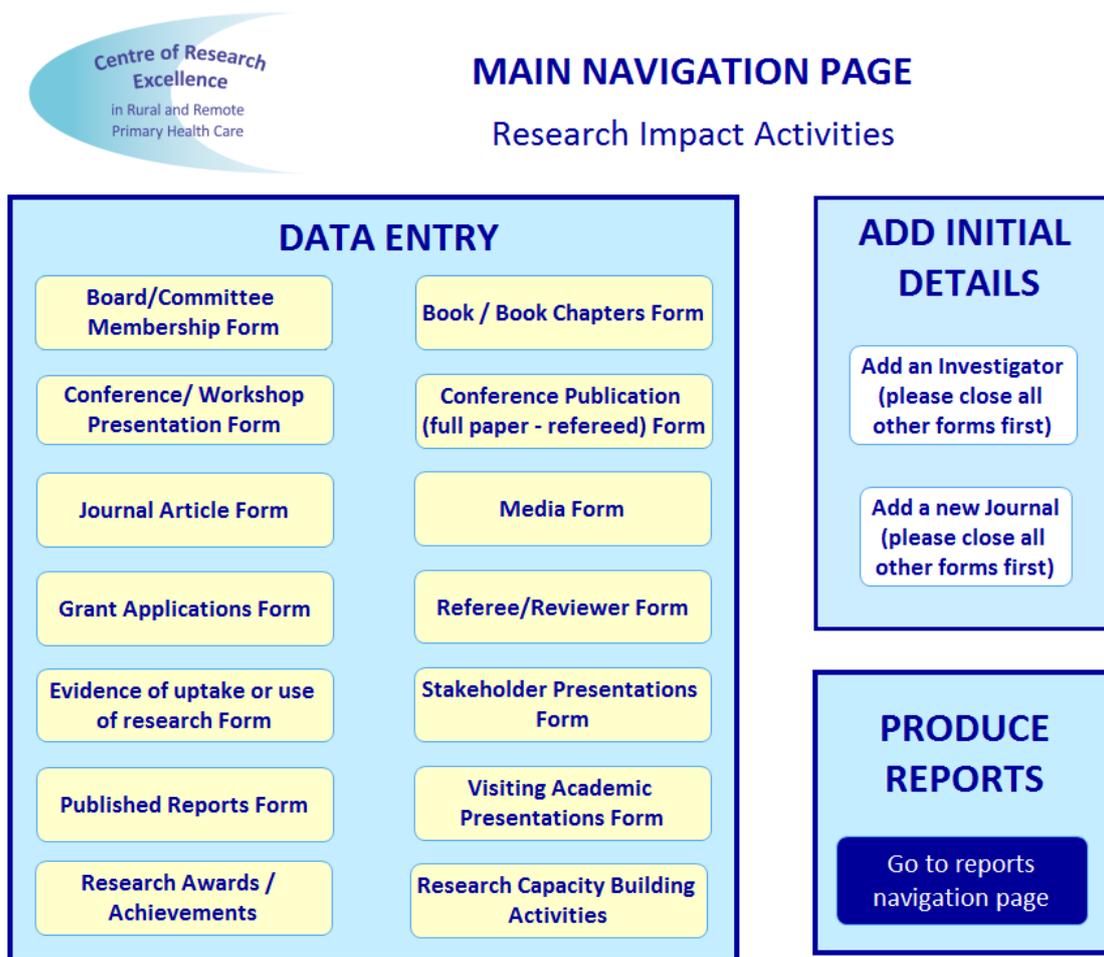iii.   whether the take-up of this evidence is *'producer' or 'user' initiated*.

Table 1   Conceptual framework for assessing the impact of research evidence

Broad area of impact	Specific areas of impact	Key audience Stakeholders	Evidence	
			Producer push	User pull
Research-related impact 'Advancing Knowledge'	➢ New knowledge ➢ Capacity building	➢ Researchers ➢ Educators ➢ Media	➢ Publications ➢ Media releases ➢ Grants ➢ PhDs	➢ Access hits & citations ➢ Media interviews ➢ Secondary circulation
Policy impact 'Informing decision making'	➢ Evidence base ➢ Influence in decision-making	➢ Policy makers ➢ Politicians ➢ Professional bodies	➢ Policy briefs ➢ Presentations	➢ Rapid responses ➢ Decision maker awareness & use ➢ Invited policy papers
Service impact 'Improving health & health systems'	➢ Evidence-based practice ➢ Quality & safety ➢ Efficiency ➢ Cost effectiveness	➢ Managers ➢ Health workforce ➢ Consumers	➢ Evaluation reports ➢ Practice guidelines ➢ Recommended models	➢ Decision maker awareness & use ➢ Board membership
Societal impact 'Creating broad social & economic benefit'	➢ Health literacy ➢ Health behaviour ➢ Health status	➢ Consumers ➢ advocates	➢ Media releases ➢ Evidence of changes	➢ Website hits ➢ Media coverage ➢ Consumer surveys

The research impact database

Building on this conceptual framework, an innovative database was developed using Microsoft Access. This database enables the researcher to collect and organise evidence of the impact of research, and to monitor its take-up into policy and practice. In summary, the database enables the researcher to monitor who is affected by the research outcomes, summarises the different ways that research impacts on the activities of end-users, and helps to identify what steps are needed to ensure effective take-up into policy and implementation into practice.

The main navigation of the Research Impact Database is shown below:

Centre of Research Excellence
in Rural and Remote Primary Health Care

MAIN NAVIGATION PAGE
Research Impact Activities

DATA ENTRY

- Board/Committee Membership Form
- Book / Book Chapters Form
- Conference/ Workshop Presentation Form
- Conference Publication (full paper - refereed) Form
- Journal Article Form
- Media Form
- Grant Applications Form
- Referee/Reviewer Form
- Evidence of uptake or use of research Form
- Stakeholder Presentations Form
- Published Reports Form
- Visiting Academic Presentations Form
- Research Awards / Achievements
- Research Capacity Building Activities

ADD INITIAL DETAILS

Add an Investigator (please close all other forms first)

Add a new Journal (please close all other forms first)

PRODUCE REPORTS

Go to reports navigation page

What makes this database such a valuable resource?

Researchers typically depend on anecdotal feedback and perceptions gained from discussions with colleagues at conferences or professional meetings, as well as the occasional media article, to monitor the impact of their research. Using a database such as this brings several key benefits:

- It enables research evidence from research centres spanning multiple institutions to be systematically gathered in one repository for use by any research member;

- It can be easily maintained and updated, such that summaries can be instantly provided without the need for advance notice – a responsiveness which is increasingly sought by policymakers and service planners;

- It provides a comprehensive listing of all aspects of research – ranging from the most significant peer-reviewed publications to more ubiquitous social media hits – thereby indicating the range of impact as well as some measure of its significance;

- It provides easy organisation of material to target the needs of end-users, such that any request from diverse stakeholders can be easily met;

- It maintains and badges the intellectual property of researchers, an increasingly important academic requirement; and

- The adoption and implementation of research findings are recorded in the database as a means of tracking the knowledge uptake associated with the research activity, providing further evidence of research impact.

Following the development of this database, there was agreement within the CRERRPHC that this database could be useful to other organisations and researchers in keeping track of their research impact. Following a small media campaign, the CRERRPHC received enquiries from the UK, USA and various institutions/centres across Australia. These enquiries led to a demonstration of the database over the web and distributing a copy of the database to adapt to their own needs. While the overall architecture of the database remains intact, the ability to adapt and modify it to better meet the needs of research institutions is a major strength of the tool.

The database template is available free of charge from the CRERRPHC under a licence agreement with Monash University. To arrange a demonstration, please contact lisa.lavey@monash.edu.

Conclusion

Increasingly in the modern era, researchers and research institutions are being required to monitor what effect their research has in the broader community, how its impact brings about improvements as well as justifying expenditure on research. Given the diverse and complex nature of research activities, it is vital that tools exist to facilitate these tasks for researchers and their institutions. Without such tools researchers will need to spend considerable time monitoring their evidence every time a request to justify their activity is made. The research impact database outlined above is easy-to-use, freely available and ultimately an indispensable resource for measuring research impact and facilitating up-take of research evidence.

Acknowledgments

Recommendation

Given the increasing need for academic researchers to justify research funding, rural health researchers should make greater use of existing databases to assist in collating and organising research evidence for monitoring how their findings impact in the policy and practice arenas.

Reference

1. Buykx P, Humphreys JS, Wakerman J, Perkins D, Lyle D, McGrail M, Kinsman L. Making evidence count - framework to monitor the impact of health services research. Australian Journal of Rural Health 2012; 20(2): 51-58.

Presenter

Lisa Lavey has been Project Manager for the Centre of Research Excellence in Rural and Remote Primary Health Care for the past four years and has recently returned to her role as Research Administration Manager in the School of Rural Health at Monash University. Lisa has extensive administration experience working in universities, government departments and not-for-profit organisations and has managed whole-of-department research, teaching and other portfolio programs. She has extensive skills in office management, program presentation and marketing,

human resources, finance and IT. Her office management achievements were recognised through an award by the Australian Institute of Office Professionals in 2007, and she was a key member of the team that received the Vice Chancellors Award for Exceptional Performance by Professional Staff in 2008. Lisa has assumed a leadership role in managing multi-site research programs, and has presented at major national conferences in Australia and New Zealand.