

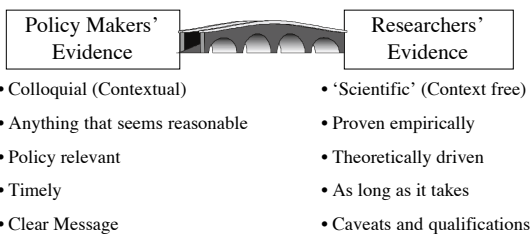
How can qualitative research inform public health policy?

Professor Elizabeth Waters
 Chair in Public Health, Deakin University
 VicHealth Public Health Research Fellow
 Director, Cochrane Health Promotion and Public Health Field
 Member, Cochrane Collaboration Steering Group

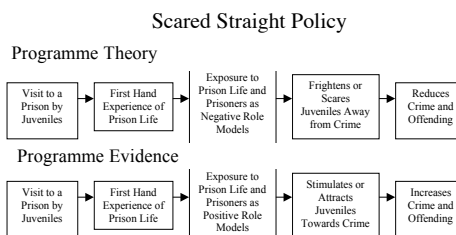
This presentation

- Context for public health policy decision making
- Public health within Cochrane Collaboration:
 - strategies to improve the quality and quantity of reviews
 - Questions asked by public health decision makers
 - Guidelines for public health reviews

Challenge 1 - Different Notions of Evidence (J. Lomas *et al.*, 2005)



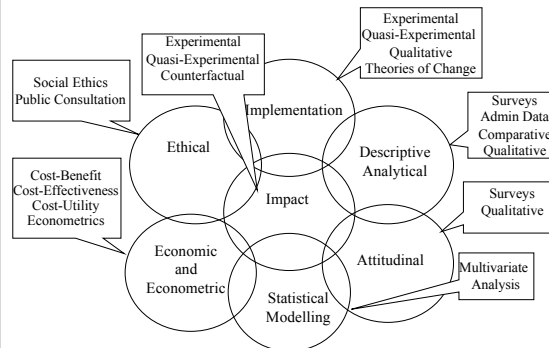
Development Needs of Policymakers 3 Establish the Policy Logic/Theory of Change



Know the Place of Evidence



Know the different sorts of evidence



Background

- Research and evaluation long played a part in health and social policies
 - Sometimes more than practitioners would like
 - Sometimes less than researchers would like
- 'Research informed' always controversial
- 19th Century – early proponents of gap between intention to do good and having a beneficial effect
- Evidence based practice has increased pressure on practitioners
- Increasing amount and varying quality makes integration of evidence into practice difficult

Why careful evaluation is crucial – a hypothetical¹

- Evaluation of 'discussion based groups for parenting' program,
 - Designed well and carefully
 - Evaluation process and impact based on attendance, views of workers, and views of attendees, and observations of apparent child wellbeing
 - Work presented well – picked up by the media
- Before asserting that "discussion groups work" need to be certain that
 1. improvements *have* taken place
 2. Brought about as a result of the discussion group

Difficult to be certain unless....

- Mechanisms in place for ruling out competing explanations:
 - Parents might have improved with time and increased confidence. (Evidence that psych problems improve spontaneously in 2/3 of cases)
 - Children more manageable by spending time with playgroup workers
 - Other external factors, eg income support
 - Parental learning the 'right' things to say – familiar with expectations of workers
 - Participating parents highly motivated – or those dropped out might have done just as well.
- Problem is – **we generally don't know. Need to know what other studies have found and how robust they are.**
- **Could be chance that it worked...**

Maybe...

- Other studies show it doesn't work
- Only works in some settings
- For only some types of parents

What role high quality evaluations will play

- It is less important that we know what we know, but that we know what we do not know.
- *Lao-Tze, Chinese Philosopher (ca.604-521 BCE)*
- Building the evidence base in and for health interventions is essential
- Qualitative and quantitative information is crucial – *what works for whom and why*
- Most research and evaluations can only be understood in context – and a key part of that context consists of the results of other studies that tested the same hypothesis, in similar populations.

What role can systematic reviews play?

- Key source of evidence based information to
 - support and develop practice,
 - support professional development by helping to identify
 - new and emerging developments and
 - gaps in knowledge
- Systematic reviews provide a synthesis of robust studies which no policy maker or practitioner, however diligent, could possibly hope to read themselves.

Systematic reviews...

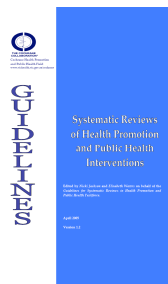
- **Are not:**
 - Reviews of studies that have been easy to find
 - Reviews that support the policy or intervention that you want to introduce
 - Reviews that leave out findings you don't like or are inconclusive
- **Can tell:**
 - State of knowledge in an area
 - Any inconsistencies within it
 - Clarify what remains to be known

How evaluations are used in systematic reviews?

- Systematic reviews seek to extract information systematically from studies which meet inclusion criteria
- Recommendations for research and practice – content and methods

Guidelines on Cochrane HP&PH Systematic Reviews recommend:

- Advisory Group of users and researchers
- Policy relevant interventions
- Broad scope of study designs
- Theoretical framework
- Extraction and integration of process, impact and outcome data
- Cost related evaluation – cost consequence, cost effectiveness
- **Integrating qualitative and quantitative studies**
- Heterogeneity
- Equity and sociocultural
- Integrity of intervention
- Public health ethics
- Sustainability



Evaluation and advocacy

- Significant proportion of health interventions unevaluated
- Cochrane review on increasing participation in sport found NO evaluations....in context of large amounts of funding
- Evaluation is not an evaluation of those involved but an essential step to know that
 - We are making a difference in a positive direction, or not.
 - *If not, why not*
- Content of systematic reviews dependent on primary research and evaluation

Conclusion 1

- Policy and program decisions are dependent on lots of things – but evaluations that can say *what works, what doesn't, for who and for how much*, are essential
- Improving benefits and avoiding harm core – intuition and good intentions are not enough.
- Systematic reviews provide a supportive partner to advocate for high quality studies
- Qualitative research is essential in this context

Final conclusion

- Cochrane Collaboration is a large multi pronged elaborate organisation
- Focus is on evaluating effectiveness of interventions. Need to know –
 - *Study design rigour* re what study design for what question? Does need clear advice
 - How to integrate qualitative research into evaluations
 - Advice for authors doing reviews
 - Advice for Review Groups Coordinators, Editors and Search Coordinators
 - Impact on software support eg. The Cochrane Library, Revman
- High quality relevant reviews for decision makers will be the hallmark of Cochrane going into the future, great opportunity for qualitative research