DESCRIPTING THE IMPACT OF HEALTH SERVICES AND POLICY RESEARCH

KEY MESSAGES

- Health services and policy researchers can show the practical use and societal impact of their work by using the authors’ Research Impact Framework.

- This framework can uncover real and potential impacts at the national, international and institutional levels for a wide variety of health services and policy research.

- Among the areas that may increase impact are ongoing participation in formal and informal research and policy networks; having an established academic track record; and seizing opportunities through "policy windows."

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Health services and policy researchers may often find themselves wishing there was a better way than ad hoc brainstorming to determine where and how their findings will help improve health system decision-making.

To help, a team of British researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine has developed a Research Impact Framework. The framework involves using semi-structured interviews with researchers to help show the practical use and societal impacts of their work.

Building the framework

To create the framework, the researchers reviewed what they considered to be the main models for assessing health research. They used their findings to create a map of the areas such as policy and societal impacts where research findings might make a difference. To add strength to their framework, they also used a list of proposed criteria for assessing research put together by a consortium of institutions of higher education in the United Kingdom.

The team then did an analysis of seven different research projects that addressed health services and health policy, with additional analysis of four projects. All of the projects were completed or near completion and all of the principal researchers said previous attempts to identify how their research results might be used had been challenging. With input from interviewees, the authors refined their framework, which systematically uncovered potential policy, practice and societal impacts.

Initial doubts give way

At first, the principal investigators and their interviewees expressed doubts as to whether one could isolate verifiable information about the policy or practice implications of applied research. However, they quickly found that using the framework to discuss their work gave their thoughts more structure and revealed an untapped cache of potential
impacts.

All of the projects exhibited the ability to influence policy at national, international and institutional levels. And these impacts were not restricted to health services — they could also have an effect on related areas such as economic policy.

The framework also helped identify areas thought to influence research impacts including ongoing involvement in research and policy networks (both inside and outside formal bureaucratic circles); being well known in a particular field; and being able to respond quickly to policy windows or opportunities.

**Bibliographic Reference(s)**