WHEN HEALTH SERVICES RESEARCHERS AND POLICY MAKERS INTERACT: TALES FROM THE TECTONIC PLATES

KEY MESSAGES

- Building long-term relationships between policy makers and researchers is arguably the most important way to increase the use of research.
- Involving policy makers as early as possible in research gives them a vested interest in the findings.
- Researchers need not worry if their research does not attract great attention at first—opportunities to share findings will emerge as new policy challenges (or even old ones) arise.

This is a summary of an article by Patricia J. Martens and Noralou P. Roos, published in Healthcare Policy in 2005.

Canadian health services researchers have come a long way in determining how to translate research evidence into action. In this paper, researchers Patricia Martens and Noralou Roos provide an overview of some of the collective wisdom of researchers in interacting with public-policy decision makers. Their findings draw on their own experiences at the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy—a unit within the University of Manitoba’s Faculty of Medicine—but also from leaders in health services research from across the country.

Encourage Policy Makers to invest their Time and Funds

Ideally, the people using research results should be involved in research projects from start to finish, giving the research a good mix of storytelling and research validity. If this isn’t feasible, another way to get users involved early on is to get them to invest in the research. The only drawback to this strategy is how the public may perceive it if a policy-making body is the sole funder of a research centre or a project, the researchers run the risk of looking like paid consultants.

Build Relationships with Policy Makers

Because researchers and the people running the health system have different interests, it’s worth the time and effort to build solid, healthy and preferably long-term relationships between the two groups. There are many ways to do this: informal chats, regular meetings, or developing either informal or formal contractual partnerships (the importance of contractual partnerships can’t be overstated, say the authors). For those who are having trouble building informal relationships, even regular meetings to produce specific “deliverables” can help maintain contact.

Communicate the Real Value of the Research Evidence

Another tried-and-true way to reach policy makers is by creating short,
plain-language summaries of research findings. Summaries can be presented on paper or in conversation, but personal, face-to-face interaction remains the best way. It also pays to have a handful of clear, rehearsed messages to communicate, particularly if the results are unexpected or controversial. Storytelling is also a useful technique in presenting research a good analogy or a simple graph can bring an important point alive to non-researchers.

**Be Persistent but Patient**
Martens and Roos discuss taking a "back pocket" mindset to getting research used. They argue that even when research findings are not attracting great interest, researchers need not be overly concerned. That’s because health system issues and challenges resurface time and time again, allowing researchers to reintroduce relevant research evidence.

**Conclusion**
Getting evidence into policy is not an easy task, but there are steps researchers can take to achieve this end. Ultimately, the greatest lesson for translating research evidence into policy is to work on building relationships with policy makers.

**Bibliographic Reference(s)**