FACTORS INFLUENCING THE UTILIZATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS BY HEALTH POLICY MAKERS IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY: THE SELECTION OF MALI’S ESSENTIAL MEDICINES

A study on healthcare decision-making in Mali, West Africa found the factors influencing research use in developing countries are similar to those in developed countries, with two key exceptions: the authority of the person presenting the evidence and who should be responsible for gathering it.

The factors that were the same as those in developed countries were access to information, relevance of and trust in the findings, competency in reading and interpreting the evidence, and having the time to read and interpret research.

The following is a summary of a journal article by Michael A. Albert, Atle Fretheim, and Diadié Maïga

In developed countries, we are getting clearer about the factors that influence if and how policy makers use research. However, we do not know as much about what these factors are in developing countries.

Albert, Fretheim, and Maïga’s qualitative study focused on Mali’s National Commission, a group charged with updating the country’s essential drug list to ensure medications covered meet the health needs of its population. That group works from a model list published by the World Health Organization (WHO) every two years and modifies it to reflect the country’s specific situation. For many years, for example, the Malian list has contained several medicines not on the WHO list, including “improved traditional medicines.”

The authors conducted interviews and a group discussion with 19 Malian commissioners to determine the factors that affected the use of research in decisions over what drugs made the list. For the most part, the findings mirrored the factors identified in developed countries, with two unique exceptions:

1) the authority of those who present their scientific views; and
2) accountability for gathering research evidence.

Authority of those who present their views

The study found an uncritical reliance on scientific specialists. The “position” of the speaker often gave his evidence an aura of unquestioned authority. It was suggested that Mali’s predominantly verbal society might contribute to the importance placed on information offered by respected speakers.

Accountability for gathering research evidence

The study also found confusion among participating commissioners over whose role it is to find appropriate research. Medical professionals and specialists on the commission indicated it should be government technicians, while those technicians pointed to specialists. They concluded a specific person or group should be delegated to compile relevant research for the policy question at hand.

While the authors suggest the above two factors should be investigated for relevance in other settings, they add the Malian experience did support six key factors identified in the literature as influencing research use by policy makers.
Access to information

In Mali, not having access to paid research sites or even to the Internet can cause research access problems. Other contributing conditions are the lack of staff, the limited number of contacts available, and — because most research is written in English — the country’s reliance on French-language texts. The authors suggest three potential interventions: 1) training policy makers to acquire and adapt high-quality, relevant research; 2) promoting the use of systematic reviews of medical practice (produced by organizations like the Cochrane Collaboration or the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence in the U.K.); and 3) enticing multi-national organizations, like the WHO’s Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative, to act as knowledge brokers for policy makers in developing countries.

Relevance of research findings

The study’s participants questioned the value of research to their work, stating research is often conducted for its own sake or to promote the careers of researchers. The findings indicate more collaboration between researchers and policy makers would be beneficial, giving policy makers a better understanding of and more input into the research process.

Trust in the research

Information from trusted journals or international organizations was given the most weight. Also, participating commissioners said they wanted research summaries to contain the methodologies and references used so they could assess the trustworthiness of the results.

Competency in reading and interpreting research

Malian commissioners with experience working on research studies felt they were better able to use research in their deliberations on essential drug coverage as well as convince others of the merits of consulting the research. Those with less experience thought an improved appreciation of scientific methods would increase their ability to understand the research and heighten the importance they place on it.

Time-consuming process

Participants recommended researchers provide short, concise documents to reduce the time involved reviewing the evidence, further ensuring it gets used.

Valuing research over other interests and demands

Even though several study participants thought the job of customizing the essential drug list was essentially a scientific endeavour, and should therefore be most heavily influenced by research, others felt political interests and demands from patients and healthcare professionals often took precedence.

In their concluding remarks, the authors recommend further study into 1) how best to advocate for critical evaluation of all information sources and 2) to whom to delegate the task of searching for relevant research. Their findings suggest that by improving the factors identified here, health policy makers will be able to make better decisions on behalf of populations that may have the most to gain. While this research is of particular interest to people trying to bridge the research-policy gap in developing countries, it also supports the findings on knowledge transfer based on experiences from developed countries and is therefore of more general interest and applicability.

Bibliographic Reference


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