Building Strategies to Get Syntheses in the Hands of Health System Managers and Policy Makers

Afternoon Session CHSRF 2006 Annual Workshop

(Vancouver, B.C., March 22, 2006)
Key Messages and Summary

Key Messages

- There are typically several decision-making bodies with an interest in any particular synthesis topic, and within an organization there are several decision makers. Each has specific needs and constraints.
- It is crucial to uncover and take into account the different potential audiences for a synthesis from the start:
  - to facilitate implementation by understanding and addressing potential constraints for the uptake of the findings;
  - to select the right decision makers to provide input and participate, at each relevant step of the process; and
  - to better tailor different synthesis reports and dissemination activities.
- Syntheses written for decision makers should provide tools, such as logic models or decision trees, to help think through issues related to implementation.

Summary

The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation organized an afternoon session on Building strategies to get syntheses in the hands of health system managers and policy makers for its 2006 annual workshop. The session included three formal presentations, some focused discussions in small groups, and a final plenary. It was facilitated by Susan Law, director of research programs at the foundation.

Formal Presentation 1: Diane Gagnon
(Senior Program Officer, Canadian Health Services Research Foundation)

- The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation is dedicated to developing the “science” of synthesis to:
  - compensate for limitations of systematic review methods in answering questions related to policy and management; and
  - ensure scientific integrity while addressing issues related to the complex and messy decision-making process (that is, timeliness, relevance, and applicability).
- Syntheses can be created for “knowledge support” or “decision support” (and sometimes both), which can be considered two poles of a continuum. Features of a decision support synthesis generally include the activities of a knowledge support synthesis — scoping, reviews, and scientific collection of evidence — but, in addition, place findings specifically within a context in which managers and/or policy makers may derive implications and recommendations for action.
- While undertaking syntheses, key notions to consider are transparency, feasibility, interactions, and the need for multiple products and dissemination activities for various audiences.
- Concurrent with increasing knowledge on how to provide scientific integrity in syntheses, we need to:
better determine how to support decision-making; and
formally test the validity and value of alternative synthesis approaches, to further advance and identify best practices.

Formal Presentation 2: Anne McFarlane
(Executive Director, Canadian Institute for Health Information, Western Office)

- Syntheses answer three types of questions:
  - Should we fund x which does y?
  - Should we fund x screening approach?
  - Should we develop a program for y?
- There are three phases in a synthesis: design, development, and discussion. Throughout the phases, the involvement level of decision makers will differ according to the type of study needed:
  - if it entails qualitative research, decision makers will be engaged throughout the process; or
  - if it relies predominantly on randomized controlled trials, they will be less involved during the design and development and more in the discussion.
- When planning a synthesis, it is important to select the right decision makers and inform them of the level of involvement expected.
- It is also important to keep in touch with decision makers throughout the process, if only by e-mail.
- Decision makers are accountable and need to be able to justify decisions. Researchers can help create the basis for the justification.

Formal Presentation 3: Robert Smith
(Trustee, Canadian Health Services Research Foundation)

- When undertaking a synthesis, it is important to determine who the final “customer” will be. A customer’s uptake of the findings may be contingent on issues such as priorities, structural constraints (such as union rules), and returns on investments (for example, if the needed skills to implement the findings are not available, is it worthwhile to invest in this?).
- One needs to find a way to assign value to research and other related factors to facilitate uptake.
- To facilitate implementation, senior decision makers should empower middle managers; they are the ones who know the language of the organization and who use results.

Small-Group Responses to Questions

Q1 — **Strategies for collaboration** — In what ways can researchers and decision makers work collaboratively throughout the synthesis process to ensure both scientific rigour and relevance to policy and practice? What should be the respective contributions and roles of researchers and decision makers?
• Models of collaboration vary according to the type of synthesis being undertaken.

• A fourth type of synthesis should be added to the three suggested by Anne McFarlane (see above). Indeed, there are syntheses that address broader questions, which have larger impacts, such as:
  o how do we address health disparities; and
  o how do we reduce absenteeism?

• There are typically several decision-making bodies with an interest in any particular synthesis topic, and each has specific needs. It is important to uncover these to better target activities and messages.

• Syntheses should provide tools, such as logic models or decision trees, to help think through issues (for example, when is it too expensive to adopt a drug?). They should also address matters beyond costs, such as efficacy.

Q2 — Methods for contextualizing evidence — During the production of a synthesis, when and how should the available scientific evidence be positioned within the realities of the decision-making context? How might deliberative processes help with contextualizing and weighing up different types of evidence?

• There is a tension between the need to have context integrated early on versus the need to respect the scientific process. Much depends on the specific question being studied and the contextual factors at play (such as cost-effectiveness, political or cultural issues, etc.).

• There are several issues that need to be taken into account:
  o an organization is made up of several decision makers, rather than just one;
  o there is a mismatch between the researchers’ and decision makers’ timelines; and
  o very often, there is a “middle agent” that acts as a filter between researchers and decision makers.

Q3 — Structure of report — The foundation’s proposed framework includes a report of the research findings and, separately, recommendations that arise from a roundtable event. In practical terms, who should write the recommendations and how should the final report be structured and presented to decision makers? Three options are below. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

a. A single document including research findings and roundtable recommendations written by the research team

b. One or more documents — research findings written by the researchers and recommendations from the roundtable written by an independent writer

c. A single document (written by a plain-language writer) that presents the recommendations with supporting evidence from the research report

No simple solution was agreed on. Key points from the discussion include:

• There are several audiences for a synthesis, and different reports are needed for each. Therefore, more resources and time are also needed.
• The person who writes the report that includes the recommendations needs to be credible. Be wary of hiring an independent writer.
• The plain-language writer needs to know about the topic and should always consult with the research team to ensure the information is accurate.