How to be a good research partner
A guide for health-system managers and policy makers
OUR PURPOSE

Vision
Our vision is a strong Canadian healthcare system that is guided by solid, research-based management and policy decisions.

Mission
Our mission is to support evidence-based decision-making in the organization, management and delivery of health services through funding research, building capacity and transferring knowledge.

Approach
Our focus is on the people who run the health system, as well as health services researchers. We help them get involved in research that makes a difference, help them produce, find and apply new knowledge to improve management and policy decisions, and bring the two groups together so they can each influence each other’s work and share ideas and experiences.
Key implications for decision makers

• Participation in collaborative research requires a professional relationship based on teamwork and co-operation. It does not represent a traditional client-contractor relationship.

• Being a decision-maker partner offers the opportunity to participate in expanding the amount of scientific evidence available for use in making decisions within an organization.

• Decision makers can participate at a variety of levels - from having a funder/advisor role to being one of the principal investigators.

• Being a decision-maker partner does not have to require a large amount of time; partnership is meant to be flexible, depending on the role and needs of the decision maker.

• Participation in the research process makes it easier to understand the results and put them into practice.

The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation would like to thank Quebec’s Ministry of Health and Social Services for allowing us to use information from its partnership guide in this document.
Introduction

This guide was designed to be used by managers and other decision makers in the health system. It is based on work done by the Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services to help managers there understand what it means to be an individual decision-maker partner, as part of a research team, on collaborative research funded by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation. This guide can be used and adapted by decision makers in any jurisdiction interested in collaborating on research.

This guide contains information on the following topics:

- What is a decision-maker partner?
- What is collaborative research?
- What do I need to know about being a decision-maker partner?
  - Why should I participate in collaborative research as a decision-maker partner?
  - What do I need to do and how much time will it take?
- How do I become a decision-maker partner in collaborative research?
  - What are the parameters of the partnership?
  - At what stage do I get involved with preparing the research?
  - Will I provide funding for the research?
  - How will we resolve problems that come up?
  - How will we evaluate the success of the partnership when the research is finished?
- Sharing the results: how do I get the word out?
  - Invite the researchers to speak to decision makers
  - Report on how the research is going
  - Help the research team identify the key results and messages
  - Release the results in a timely manner
- What other resources are available to decision-maker partners?
  - Theme officers
  - Newsletters
  - Intra/Internet
- Conclusion

What is a decision-maker partner?

Individual decision makers become partners in collaborative research when they work either as members of the investigative team or when they play a significant advisory role. Decision makers’ participation as partners on collaborative research demonstrates clearly the importance of the topic to them. It also demonstrates that they are committed to sharing issues and results and to developing an ongoing relationship with a group of researchers to improve the decision-making or policy aspects of their work. Becoming a decision-maker partner is not a traditional client-contractor relationship; rather, it is a professional relationship where each partner respects the expertise and skills of the other to work for their mutual benefit.

What is collaborative research?

Collaborative research involves a partnership between researchers and decision makers - health-system managers and policy makers. It focuses on applying research to health services problems and aims to find concrete answers to difficult problems. Collaborative research includes linkage and exchange - the regular sharing of issues and results between researchers and the people who need to use research results. It also involves the decision-maker partners in designing dissemination and knowledge transfer activities, both for their own organization and for a broader network of potential users.
What do I need to know about being a decision-maker partner?

Why should I participate in collaborative research as a decision-maker partner?

Participation in collaborative research usually increases the amount of scientific evidence available to use when making organizational decisions. Decision makers from the Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services who have participated in collaborative research have found many benefits:

- Decision makers have more confidence in and a better understanding of the research results. Rather than simply getting a report, they understand why the research results are valid and what the limits are. This then encourages decision makers to use the results in their daily work.

- Decision makers can advise the researchers with whom they’re working. They can tell their research partners which results are the most important to decision makers, and they can provide advice on the best way to present results.

- Decision makers develop a sense of objectivity. This allows them to look at their organization with a more critical eye and encourages fresh thinking.

- Decision makers have more contact with a wider scope of research, which improves their level of scientific knowledge.

- Decision makers have rapid access to preliminary research data, which helps them to start making early corrections to noted problems.

What do I need to do and how much time will it take?

The specific activities of decision-maker partners can vary depending on their interests, skill sets, and availability. Their role may also depend on the nature of the research and the type of relationship that suits both the researchers and decision makers. The requirements should be designed to be flexible and should be adapted to meet the needs of each partner.

The amount of time decision makers invest in the partnership also varies greatly, depending on how involved they decide to become. For instance, participation in an advisory committee generally requires attending meetings at major stages of the research, mostly during planning at the beginning of the research and then at the end of the research when the results are ready to be disseminated and used. Between these stages, only minimal involvement is required. If the decision-maker partners are providing access to their organization’s data and internal documents, they will mainly be involved when the researchers gather their information. On the other hand, if a decision-maker partner wants to get involved in the research itself, participation requires increased availability and sometimes requires specialized training or expertise.

How do I become a decision-maker partner in collaborative research?

What are the parameters of the partnership?

Before the research begins, the researchers and the decision-maker partners should agree on their respective roles. They should use this early stage to decide how much time will be invested by the decision-maker partners, what roles they will have, and what research goals and questions have the greatest potential benefit for decision makers.

At what stage do I get involved with preparing the research?

It is important that the decision-maker partners help the research team define the goals and objectives of
the research, as well as identify the potential users of the results. The decision-maker partners help ensure the results will be of assistance to their organizations.

**Will I provide funding for the research?**

Not all decision-maker partners provide funding to the research team. A contribution of time or access to decision-making organizations’ information resources can be just as valuable. Therefore, one of the first items to discuss is whether the decision-maker partners will act as funders and, if so, what the partners’ expectations and requirements are.

**How will we resolve problems that come up?**

As with any professional relationship, researchers and decision makers who are collaborating on research need to have a system in place to resolve problems. This will vary with the needs and comfort level of the individuals involved, and could include communicating through a liaison or regular meetings of both partners.

**How will we evaluate the success of the partnership when the research is finished?**

Research partnerships can be evaluated in much the same way as any other partnership. Evaluation should be ongoing throughout the length of the partnership, and it can include measures such as how frequently the research is used or the number of new professional opportunities that arise from the work. It is important to remember that researchers may have different indicators of success than decision makers do, so it is important both sides know from the beginning what outcomes they are seeking.

**Sharing the results: how do I get the word out?**

The goal of a researcher-decision-maker partnership is to make more research-based evidence available to decision makers and included in decision-making practices. There are several steps the decision-maker partners can take to help ensure this happens.

**Invite the researchers to speak to decision makers**

The decision-maker partners should have the researchers come into their organizations to present the results to a wider audience. Studies on information dissemination and knowledge transfer show face-to-face contact between researchers and decision makers increases the likelihood that research results will be used. In-person contact also builds decision makers’ trust in the research, particularly because the researchers can answer questions and link the results to the decision makers’ specific contexts.

**Report on how the research is going**

Decision makers are more likely to act on research results if they are expecting them; conversely, results that seem to come from out of nowhere may not be used adequately or quickly. This is particularly true if the results are surprising or controversial. Decision-maker partners should ensure that all their colleagues with a potential interest in the research know about its objectives from the beginning. Ongoing updates on the research progress will help keep interest alive and make other decision makers eager to use the final results.

**Help the research team identify the key results and messages**

Decision-maker partners can play a key role in helping the researchers sift through the great quantity of information that most research produces. Decision makers can help the research team identify the most useful kinds of analyses and, later, identify the most important results to disseminate. Moreover, during the dissemination stage, the decision-maker partner can also help translate the key results into messages that are clear and relevant to decision-making.
Release the results in a timely manner

Effective use of research results is often a question of timing: can research findings be made available to the decision-making audience when it is ready and able to use the information? Being aware of the needs and capabilities of this audience, and adapting dissemination efforts to these needs and capabilities, makes it more likely the results will be put to good use. As well, by releasing the results in a timely manner, the research team can build on the momentum and interest created by early reports of preliminary results.

What other resources are available to decision-maker partners?

Theme officers

The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation has a theme officer working in each of the areas of primary healthcare, nursing, health human resources, and managing continuity of care. Their job is to be aware of the research in their theme areas, of who is doing research, and of who is looking for research in that area. Theme officers work as knowledge brokers and can help disseminate research results to the appropriate people at other decision-making organizations.

Newsletters

Many provincial departments and non-governmental organizations produce newsletters that are designed to help decision makers. Decision-maker partners can use these vehicles to disseminate the research results to a wide audience. Newsletters can be useful at all stages of the research: raising awareness of new research, disseminating preliminary results at strategic moments to build excitement, or serving as an executive summary of the final report.

Intra/Internet

Decision makers should explore the possibility of posting the results of their research on web sites that are trusted for their quality. It may also be possible to disseminate the results via listservs. Internal Intranets within decision-making organizations can also help spread the results among decision-maker partners’ colleagues.

Conclusion

Becoming involved in the collaborative research process is one of the most important things a decision maker can do to extend the use of research-based evidence in an organization. More important than financial backing are the intellectual and cultural effects of partnerships between researchers and the people who use research - health-services managers and policy makers. Better understanding leads to a greater use of research evidence, ultimately leading to better quality in healthcare services.

For more information on the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation and how it encourages decision-maker-researcher partnerships, please call (613) 728-2238 and ask to speak to Katherine Fafard, our senior program officer for research use, or e-mail us at katherine.fafard@chsrf.ca.

For more information on how the foundation funds collaborative research, please visit www.chsrf.ca/funding_opportunities/ogc/index_e.php.