

POLICY OPTIONS

Oral health policy: International implications for Australia

June 2016

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Policy context

'Policy studies' (i.e. the scholarly, peer-reviewed analysis of the nature of the processes by which policy is formed) is a very small research area within oral health. The study of, and advocacy for policy, has traditionally been conducted by government, the private sector and professional organisations.

The debate about the policy relevance of research is ultimately about values. However, there should be an alignment between research and national oral health policy, so that there is an evidence base to policy. Currently, no studies exist of the congruence of oral health evidence to policy and the implications of this congruence for developing more policy-relevant oral health research are unknown.

The content of research can be determined through an analysis of research databases and indicative evidence of oral health policy priorities exists in the form of oral health policy statements produced by national governments. This study describes the conceptual content of the entire corpus of oral health research abstracts for the period 2000-2012 and compares it to the content of national oral health policy documents (those of Australia and other English-speaking countries). The study aims to build an understanding of the nature of the evidence-policy divide so that research can better serve policy efforts to address oral health inequity.

Policy options

The disconnect between policy and research needs to be addressed.

- > Researchers and policy advisers need to understand the disconnect between their two world views
 - Develop a course for researchers to understand the policy adviser world view
 - Develop a course for policy advisers to understand the researcher world view
 - Both courses should be organised by someone with experience in both policy making and as a researcher in the university sector.
- > As research evidence takes a lot longer to accumulate, the best way for policy advisers to obtain evidence for policy is to ask eminent researchers in the appropriate field to give an overview of a topic prior to policy being formulated.
 - A clear set of guidelines or a template would be required for the report to policy advisers that includes the length (preferably short), and encouragement of the use of

dot points in any recommendations, research outcomes and limitations of the research.

- A short time-line (two weeks) would need to be set for the report to be submitted.
- The report should have a dot point executive summary of no more than one page in length.
- > Government should encourage research which answers current policy questions.
 - Researchers should be able to apply for policy research grants in their fields.
 - Also, policy advisers should phrase policy questions which have not been solved and are relevant in the current political context, and then open grant applications for researchers to answer the policy question.

Key Findings

The research questions were,

- > How well matched is the content of research to national oral health policy?
- > What are the implications of this for developing oral health research that is more policy relevant, particularly for the challenge of addressing unequal oral health outcomes?

The key findings in response to the research questions were,

- > There is a striking degree of disconnection between clinical concepts and health care system and workforce development concepts.
- > Oral health research and policy are so different as to raise doubts about the extent to which research is policy-relevant and policy is evidence-based. The notion of policy relevance encompasses the lack of willingness of policy advisers to embrace research, and the need for researchers to develop research that is, and is seen to be, policy-relevant.

The research reported in this paper is a project of the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute, which is supported by a grant from the Australian Government Department of Health under the Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development Strategy. The information and opinions contained in it do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Australian Government Department of Health.