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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND POLICY

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With the national health reform agenda gathering pace, both Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Minister for Health and Ageing Nicola Roxon have underlined the need for a strong evidence base to make sound policy decisions. However, there is some debate about how research evidence is translated into policy, what constitutes evidence and what mechanisms or models facilitate evidence informed policy.

Knowledge translation, knowledge brokering, knowledge transfer, research utilisation, research implementation, and 'linkage and exchange' are all terms that have been used to describe translating evidence into policy. The number and diversity of terms is generally noted as being one of the main reasons that the field itself is somewhat confusing [1, 2-4]. Despite this there is general agreement that knowledge translation (KT) is a process that aims at getting research knowledge into policy and/or practice [3, 5-7].



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A number of models have been developed to describe the ways that research knowledge is translated into policy [1, 5, 8, 9-13]. The earliest of these were described either as producer 'push' models and user 'pull' models respectively. In push models, it was felt that the existence of 'quality' research knowledge was enough for end users to take what they needed to inform either decision making or practice contexts. Pull models, by contrast, were models where the end users of any knowledge would set the parameters for the kind of information that they wanted, and would essentially contract researchers to get the information they identified was needed [11, 14, 15]. More recently, push and pull models have been replaced by what are normally called 'interaction' models which developed in response to the recognition that neither the push nor pull models were sufficient to get research knowledge into practice [16]. Interactional models are those in which the producers and users work together to set, among other things, research agendas and programs of research that would lead to the 'right kind' of research knowledge to directly inform the policy issue, or practical problem, that the knowledge is supposed to help address.

What constitutes evidence in this context is another area of active debate in knowledge translation (KT) [17, 18]. For some, evidence is defined narrowly in terms of being results produced from systematic research [19]. Others take a broader view, framing evidence as being a product of research based activities and arising from experience [2, 20]. The conceptual underpinnings of how evidence is understood here in part boil down to different types of knowledge as being either 'tacit' or 'explicit'. Tacit knowledge encompasses that knowledge which is gained through personal or professional experience, whilst explicit knowledge is produced by research [19].

Linked to these concerns over evidence is the recognition that knowledge translation environments are complex and highly nuanced [see 17]. There is some suggestion that constructions of evidence are inflected by wider social values which influence how or whether knowledge is used by different groups [13, 21, 22]. Understandings of 'good evidence', then, have much to do with how knowledge acquires 'value' within its 'use' context.

Central to any KT intervention is the issue of how research findings can be effectively transmitted to those for whom it is most relevant. One of the more popular strategies advocated in the literature is the use of skilled facilitators, often referred to as knowledge brokers. The use of knowledge brokers goes hand in hand with creating settings where fruitful interactions between user and producer groups can occur, and is certainly part of a move to bridge the gap between these groups as 'two communities': the 'research community' and the 'user community'. Superficially all knowledge brokers have a role as 'go betweens', but there are a variety of other roles that they may play. They may, for instance, be 'knowledge managers' by

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helping to synthesise research findings and transmitting it in appropriate ways to the user group. Alternatively, they may act as 'linkage agents' where the role requires fostering and building connections between user and producer groups. Finally, knowledge brokers might act as 'capacity builders' by enhancing users' access to knowledge and providing them with training that could lead to 'positive social outcomes' [23].

To summarise, KT is about getting research knowledge into practice and policy. It is concerned with both the utilisation of research as well as trying to address the underuse of research evidence. Currently, interactive models are favoured, and have largely replaced more linear 'push' and 'pull' models. With the rise of interactive approaches there has been a corresponding recognition that KT environments are complex spaces that involve equally complex interactions including those related to different 'communities' and different conceptualisations about what constitutes evidence.

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