

Influencing the policy-making process: recommendations from research

Policy pathways to promote the policymaking process

Policy-makers and researchers who are interested in evidence-based decision-making need to develop relationships with one another. Researchers need to learn what issues are a priority for government, and how priority issues are determined. It is important for policy-makers to communicate with researchers regarding how they would like the evidence presented to them in terms of format and mechanisms. It is clear that specific policy contexts require particular methods. Therefore, knowledge of the policymaking environment can help researchers know how, when and where to disseminate their research findings and improve knowledge translation.

What is the issue?

The value of using research evidence in public health policymaking has been well documented.¹⁻³ Policymakers require a process that is strong and robust in developing policy solutions to address many of society's challenges. The use of research evidence in this process is a way to achieve more effective and transparent policy-decisions.^{4,5} However, policymaking is a complex endeavour with a multitude of factors impacting on the process.⁶⁻⁸

The key barriers to the use of research evidence by policymakers include the absence of relevant research and lack of access to the research evidence that does exist.⁹⁻¹¹ Policymakers' desire access to both timely and high-quality evidence.³ Important facilitators of research utilisation in policy development and decision-making are timeliness - the right evidence at the right time - and relevance - the research is clearly related to the policy issue under consideration.¹²⁻¹⁶

Why is this issue important?

Building and improving the quality of the evidence-base to improve population health is fundamental to ensuring that evidence will be used to create healthy public policy.

Evidence is associated with the scientific outputs of research-focused institutions, for example Universities, research institutes and Non-Governmental Organisations.¹⁷

Policymaking is about developing policy solutions to solve or ameliorate real world problems. Effective knowledge translation for Health Promotion and Population Health is concerned with transferring the outputs of scientific research into policy and practice.¹⁸⁻²⁰

What did this research explore?

This research explored the extent to which research influenced policy development in alcohol and drug misuse in the Republic of Ireland. The focus was on the context in which research evidence was successful in making an impact. The pathways, linkages and exchange models that best describe how research impacts policy were investigated. This study documented how the barriers to the use of research evidence in policymaking could be overcome and the facilitators enhanced.

What are the main findings?

- In the initial phase of the policymaking process policymakers require information to establish the extent of an issue or problem in society.
- A simple linear relationship between scientific research and policy formulation where *'a piece of research ... gets accepted and implemented'* rarely occurs. Many other factors impact on the process, for example the political and organisational environment, the wider economy, the media, and lobbying and specialist groups.
- The analysis of policy documents revealed the different influences and different sources of evidence that the policymakers are subject to in the course of their work.
- The personal ideologies and belief of politicians, powerful lobby groups and perceived societal values can all be barriers to the use of research evidence.
- Budgets and time constraints are clear barriers to evidence use.
- Time- and context-specific research evidence is important for the translation of research into policy.

What are the implications?

- Policy-makers and researchers need to build good relationships. This would help researchers understand the issues that are a priority for government, and how these are determined.
- A good understanding of the theory and practice of policymaking would help researchers to be able to identify opportunities for making an influence. Researchers need to appreciate the many competing demands that impact on the time, energy and focus of policy-makers. Specific dynamics such as timing, changes in political leadership, and public opinion are all opportunities that can be employed to impact public policy.
- Concise quantitative data can be appropriate in specific situations to reduce the intellectual burden on recipients, at other times framing the evidence in anecdotal stories is required to persuade policymakers to pay attention to the evidence.

Key policy/practice recommendations

1. It is important for policy-makers to understand how much researchers want to contribute to the development of policy.
2. It is equally important for researchers to understand the time and economic constraints that policymakers work within.
3. Increasing researcher understanding of how timing, policy windows and appropriate methods to convey information to policymakers can increase the impact of their research on policy.
4. Researchers should aim to foster relationships with policymakers through informal meetings at conferences and scientific meetings.
5. Working closely with policymakers in the early stages of research projects can help forge relationships and ensure that policymakers are getting the information they require to make judicious decisions.
6. The credibility of the messenger is viewed as an important component in the successful mobilisation of knowledge. The more esteemed a researcher's work is held among his own colleagues the more policymakers are influenced by his knowledge.

7. Policymakers place value on researchers having a good understanding of government, good communication and collaborative skills, and being able to authentically represent the research evidence.
8. Specific areas for development include:
 - (i) Working in collaboration with health economists so that recommendations from research are costed
 - (ii) Analysis of changes in behaviours and attitudes of population groups after the introduction of new policies and strategies is useful to policymakers in assessing how policy makes a difference
 - (iii) Developing modelling tools for the extrapolation of present health behaviours that may in the future become a population health issue
 - (iv) Developing shared understandings of the value of different types of research, for example of how mixed methods can generate contextualised and in-depth information of a phenomenon.

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