

Summary

Knowledge review 7: Improving the use of research in social care practice

social care
institute for excellence



June 2004

What is this knowledge review about?

The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) is committed to developing and promoting evidence-based knowledge about good practice in social care. Understanding how research is used and how to improve its use is crucial for our work and the work of other organisations. This knowledge review focuses on the use of research by social care staff and how the use of research can be promoted in social care practice. It examines effective ways of promoting research use in social care, explores models of research use that include staff at different levels and settings in social care, and looks at what organisational structures are needed to realise the aim of using research to improve practice.

Who is this knowledge review for?

This knowledge review will be useful for organisations that undertake or review research evidence so that they can present research in ways that will be useful for end users. It will also be useful for social care providers to help them understand how they can improve the use of research by staff in the organisation.

How was the knowledge review conducted?

The review was conducted through the systematic search and analysis of literature, supported by fieldwork seminars and interviews. The review aimed to cover the use of research across different social care settings within the UK. It was not restricted to the professionally qualified workforce and its scope included a wide range of jobs from home care and residential care for older people, to supporting children, young people and families, to assisting people with physical disabilities, to learning difficulties and mental health problems.

Summary of the review

Introduction

Evidence-based policy and practice demands the increasing use of research as a key tool to improve practice. However, there is little point in simply increasing the rate at which research

flows to the social care workforce: little research can be directly applied to practice, many practitioners are not equipped to digest research and appropriate support systems are lacking. What is needed is a better understanding of the relationship between social care research and the work of social care practitioners, including what organisational structures are needed to realise the aim of using research to improve practice.

Aims of the review

The review aimed to:

- examine how research is used in social care;
- review the evidence about the effectiveness of different ways of promoting the use of research in social care;
- consider models of research use that can include staff at all levels and all settings in social care;
- provide an overview of models of learning and human resource management that support the use of research;
- analyse future directions for research and development in research use and practice change in social care.

Key findings

The research highlighted a wide range of applications for research, from using it to develop policy and practice, to using research to acquire knowledge and new ideas. There are pockets of research-aware individuals who can be found at any level within an organisation; however, research appears to be used less in the independent care sector. Encouragingly, though, there is evidence across the sector of a commitment to and belief in the importance of research for improving social care practice.

The research looked at how people are using research now and identified three different ways of thinking about and developing the use of research in social care. The different models may be more relevant for different sections of the social care workforce, at different stages of developing research use initiatives and for different types of research. They are not mutually exclusive and an initiative may draw on more than one model at different stages.

The research-based practitioner model

This model is about the individual having a personal commitment to using research. Individuals believe it is their role and responsibility to keep up to date with research and apply it to practice. They believe professional education and training are important in enabling the use of research and in directly applying findings to their practice.

The review findings suggest that there are a number of barriers to developing this model, including the capacity of individuals to access and interpret research.

The embedded research model

This model sees the responsibility for ensuring research informs practice lie with policy makers and service delivery managers. It sees organisations embedding research in the systems and processes of social care, such as standards, policies and procedures and tools. Managers use funding restrictions, performance management, and inspection and appraisal regimes to encourage the use of research in practice.

However, while there is some evidence of this model being used, it remains largely undeveloped within the UK social care sector.

The organisational excellence model

This model relies on social care delivery organisations to develop a research-minded culture. They create partnerships with local universities and they adapt research findings to local settings and encourage ongoing learning within organisations.

The review found support for this model among members of the social care workforce, but limited evidence of its effectiveness in practice.

Conclusions

Four key conclusions emerged from the review:

- There is much activity to promote the use of research in social care, but this needs to be coordinated to avoid duplication and to ensure best practice is shared.
- The diversity of the social care sector, in terms of service delivery organisations, client groups and the workforce, demands that a variety of actions are used to promote the use of research. These actions also need to take into account multiagency and multidisciplinary working.
- Robust evidence of what works in promoting research use in social care is limited and tends to focus on the professionally qualified workforce.
- A whole systems approach, where the use of research involves a collaborative effort between organisations and individuals, would be a positive way forward.

Future work

SCIE is producing a series of reviews and reports about how knowledge works in social care. This review is the first to examine the use of research across the social care workforce as a whole. Underpinning this programme of work is SCIE's Knowledge review 3: Types and quality of knowledge in social care, which examines what counts as evidence and knowledge in social care.

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A full version of the knowledge review is available on the SCIE website and in print from SCIE.