INTEGRATION OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE IN LOCAL PUBLIC HEALTH DECISION-MAKING: THE CASE OF VARDE MUNICIPALITY

DENMARK

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Summary

In this case study we describe a policy intervention carried out in a Danish municipality to increase integration of research evidence in the development of a strategy for physical activity. The aim of the case study is to show how the Stewardship approach was used in designing a tailored knowledge integration process inspired by the Knowledge to Action framework. This includes: 1) use of need assessment including context and stakeholder analysis and 2) use of evidence briefs, meetings and mutual guidance between policy-makers and researchers in the strategy development process.

Keywords: evidence, public health, health promotion, policy-making, decision-making, policy process, stewardship approach, knowledge to action, health policy, physical activity

SETTING AND CONTEXT

The intervention was carried out in Varde Municipality in Denmark as a part of the research programme REPOPA (REsearch into POlicy to enhance Physical Activity). REPOPA is a five-year EU FP7 funded programme aiming at developing and testing methods to facilitate integration of research evidence in decision-making with regards to development of physical activity policies (REPOPA, 2014). Varde is the fifth largest municipality in Denmark; area of 1236 km²; population of 49,969 (Varde, 2014). The 2010 health profile showed that 86.1% of the Varde citizens considered their own health as excellent, very good or good (Christensen et al., 2010). Based on the profile approximately 4,500 citizens of Varde had bad perceived physical health and 2,800 had bad perceived mental health. Furthermore, there is an inequality in health status with poorer health status and higher exposure to risk factors among less-educated and persons of non-Danish ethnicity (approximately 2.7% of the population) (Christensen et al., 2010). Varde Municipality carries out a lot of public health work (Larsen et al., 2013) and has a
health policy with special focus on physical activity, nutrition, hygiene, mental health and rehabilitation. For each of these focus areas a strategy was developed and the intervention described here focused at the physical activity strategy (Varde, 2014).

**AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF PROGRAMME/ACTIVITY**

The overall aim of the intervention was to investigate if the Stewardship approach - based on needs, context and stakeholder analysis, with the aim of strengthening the use of research evidence and other kinds of knowledge in close researcher/policy-maker collaboration - increases the level of evidence-informed policy-making. The Knowledge to Action framework was used to guide the intervention process.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN FEATURES**

The intervention started from the very beginning of the policy development process for the physical activity strategy. Collaboration between the involved researchers (postdoc, political science and postdoc, health science) and the policy-makers (a project group for the strategy development) was initiated. The aim of the strategy was ‘to make physical activity a part of all citizens’ everyday life’. The role of the researchers in this collaboration was to facilitate the use of research evidence together with other types of evidence in the policy development process. To design a tailored intervention, needs assessment was necessary. The assessment included a context and stakeholder analysis and was done via interviews, document analysis and observations. It became clear that the municipality had a lot of resources such as practitioners’ expertise and experience but needed guidance in how to use research evidence. Furthermore, the stakeholder analysis suggested that several stakeholders such as practitioners from other sectors than health and the citizens, needed to be involved in the policy process.

The needs assessment showed that an intervention with multiple components was needed. The following actions were carried out:

- Several meetings between the researchers and the project group to develop plans for formulation and implementation of the strategy. The researchers mainly helped by ensuring that the choices made could be justified by research evidence and that the formulated goals were realistic and measureable. Furthermore, the researchers helped in facilitating the collaboration between different sectors by interviewing each sector representative on the aims and needs seen from their perspective. In addition, a summary was made of perspectives of the sectors.
- The next step in the strategy development was making a catalogue of suggestions for interventions to meet the goals of the strategy. This process is ongoing. The project group will come up with suggestions on concrete interventions; the role of the researchers is to find the relevant research evidence. This will be done via developing evidence briefs summing up the relevant evidence, adapting it to the local
setting and integrating it with the other types of knowledge available. This all will be done taking into account needs of the different population groups.

- The intervention will be evaluated using a pre/post measurement of the evidence use supported by a process evaluation. In that way, it will be possible to assess whether or not a tailored Stewardship intervention is an appropriate method for increasing the integration of research evidence into decision-making. The final evaluation will be ready in 2016.

APPLICATION TO KEY PRINCIPLES OF HEALTH PROMOTION AND RELEVANT THEORY

One of the key actions defined for health promotion is to develop healthy public policies (WHO, 1986). To ensure impact of such policies they should be based on the best available evidence (Brownson et al., 2009). This evidence consists of research evidence but also of knowledge from other sources and stakeholders such as practitioners’ expertise and experience, values/norms/preferences of the community and the available resources (Larsen et al., 2012; Satterfield et al., 2009). The intervention described above aimed at integrating these different types of evidence in the process of developing a physical activity strategy at local government level. This process was guided by the Knowledge to Action framework (Straus and Holroyd-Leduc, 2008) and the Stewardship approach (Nuffield Council, 2007).

The Knowledge to Action framework aims to include all relevant participants who are targets for knowledge integration (e.g. researchers, policy-makers, citizens). The framework shows how knowledge integration happens in a circular process starting from identification of problems, assessment of knowledge integration determinants, selection, tailoring, implementing as well as evaluating interventions and determining strategies sustaining new research. In this circular process, the evidence goes through a refining process in order to transform to a more useful end-product. Especially this is done by tailoring the evidence to the specific context in which it is used (Straus and Holroyd-Leduc 2008).

The process of tailoring leads to the other approach used in the intervention; the Stewardship approach; it is an ethical approach targeting at reducing inequalities, recognizing vulnerable groups, creating healthy environments and justice. In terms of public health policy development it furthermore takes up the perspective that policies need to do more than provide information: They should actively help people to easily lead healthy lives (Nuffield Council, 2007). This can be done via:

- ensuring a fit between policy objectives and organizational structure and culture
- ensuring tools for implementation
- building coalitions and partnerships
- ensuring accountability
- generating intelligence (evidence-informed decision-making) (Federici et al., 2012; La Torre et al., 2012).
REFERENCES


