Linking research and practice

Attempts to integrate research in social welfare into social care practice and management have to date been only partially successful. In a review of the process, a team from Barnardo's spoke to those who commission research, those who carry it out, those who disseminate it and those who, potentially, make use of it. They examined current approaches to dissemination and considered their effectiveness. They highlight obstacles to successful integration of research into practice, and suggest a range of strategies to assist successful dissemination and implementation of research findings.

- While there is widespread awareness of the importance of disseminating research, active implementation of research into practice is very limited. Interviewees felt the greatest danger was the assumption that producing and disseminating the research is sufficient.

- Researchers are paying greater attention than ever to the production of their research findings in a flexible range of formats, in recognition of the varied needs of their consumers.

- Active dissemination of research is often under-resourced by research commissioners and researchers. Insufficient time and money are set aside when the original funding is considered.

- Reconciling the needs and standards of the research community and those of policy-makers and practitioners creates a tension. If the needs of the latter are ignored, the research will simply not be used.

- Social care practice is subject to many influences; research is rarely the sole influence, and takes its place alongside custom, legislation, charismatic leadership and public expectations.

Research organisations have become increasingly aware of the need to get research messages into policy and practice, and there is some evidence that they have got better at this. However, whilst some important initiatives exist, there are still concerns that research does not inform practice to the extent that it should.

The role of research
Existing literature on disseminating research, both in social care and in health care, tells us that:

- The knowledge base on effective dissemination and implementation of research findings is still poor.
- Research on its own is insufficient; development and implementation need to follow dissemination.
- We can learn much from techniques in changing professional behaviour from other services, notably health.
- Implementing research is a two-way process – practitioners need to be able to get information when they need it, and they need to be in a position to influence the research agenda.
- The end point user needs to be recognised as a powerful force in demanding the best of what works.

In the views of managers and practitioners, research fulfils the following purposes:
- Provides a theoretical framework.
- Acts as a source of motivation and new ideas.
- Acts as justification or ammunition.
- Helps assess probabilities and helps prioritise.

Respondents reported an extensive range of dissemination processes (see Figure 1).

The presence of such dissemination methods, some of them very imaginative, was no assurance in itself that the research findings had been integrated into practice. It simply showed that these dissemination methods are being used. Indeed, a focus on dissemination rather than development is a constant theme of the whole study.

Most respondents were able to cite examples of research which they felt had influenced social care policy and practice. The earliest example given was a study by Jack and Barbara Tizard (1968) on the impact on children of being accommodated in residential nurseries.

"They … came up with a quite clear and unmistakable message that residential nurseries were bad for children in the main, however good they may be for training purposes." (Director of Voluntary Organisation)

Figure 1: Dissemination processes
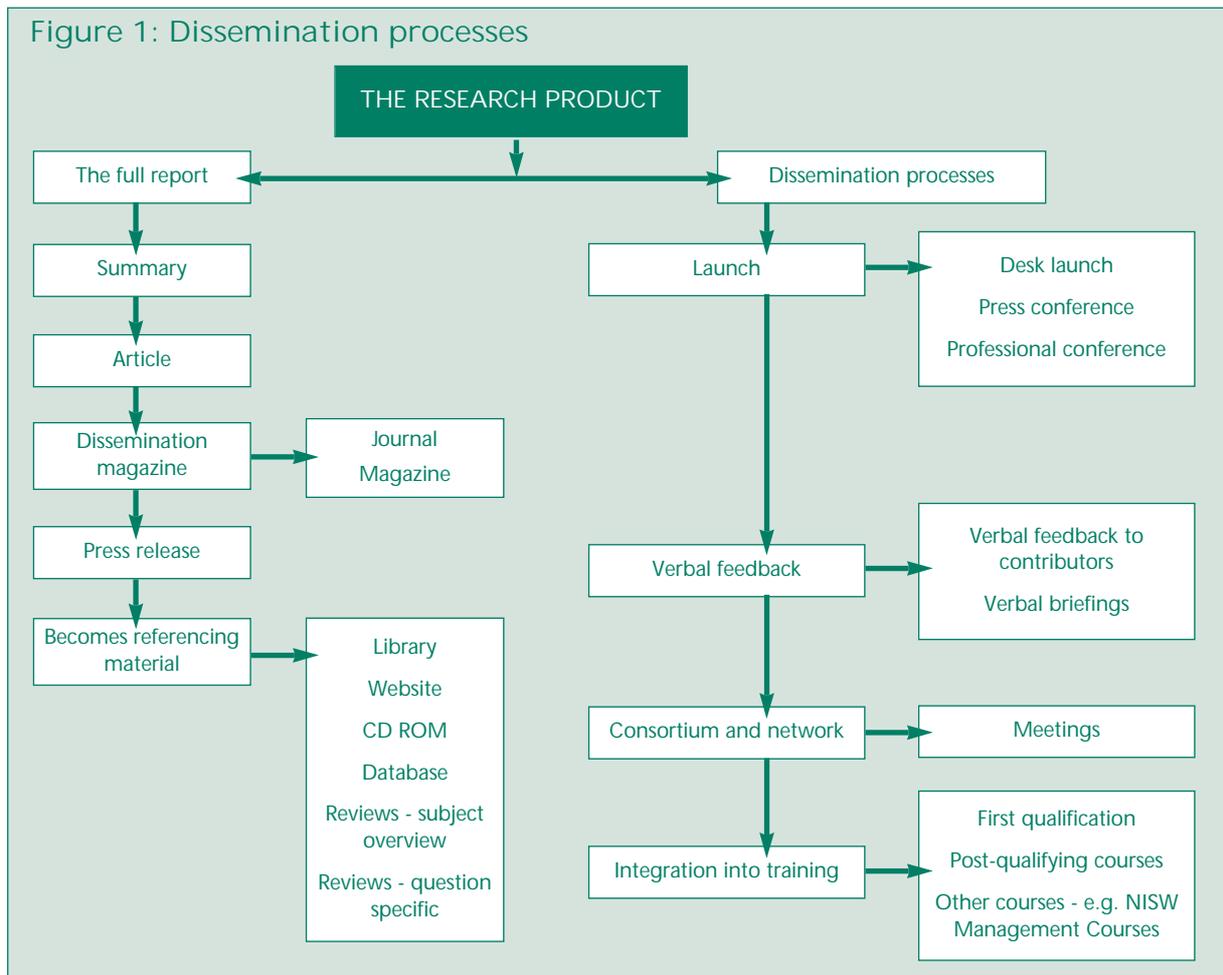
As a direct consequence of that one study, a voluntary organisation decided to close their residential nurseries, and to replace them by day centres.

The 'Looking After Children' project (eg *Looking after children: Research into practice*, H. Ward, 1995, HMSO) is another clear example of research influencing policy and practice, involving contributions from several University departments and child care organisations.

Other influences on practice

- Focus group respondents identified the assessed needs of families and the best interests of the child as central influences on decision-making.
- The Children Act was repeatedly mentioned as a reference point for decision-making, and the policies and guidance coming from the Department of Health, the Scottish Executive and other government departments carried considerable weight.
- Resource limitations act as a constraint on decisions. This was not merely about finite resources but about the range of choices available. (For example, a number of comments were made about the limited choices available for placing looked after children according to their needs.)
- The local interpretation of national policy had great impact on day-to-day decisions.
- Many respondents saw managers as the prime arbiters of decision-making.
- Both the personal and professional experience of individuals and the collective experience of teams were cited as influences on decisions.
- Decision-making in social care is inevitably influenced by public opinion generally and by the perceptions of partner agencies.
- There was a widespread view that decision-making is influenced by the prevailing organisational and team culture which become the 'way things are done around here'.

Resources for dissemination

"I can't understand what a discipline is about unless it has somewhere in its charter, in its mission, better information for the public. That seems to me to be a moral question. There are real epistemological problems with doing a social discipline unless you are committed to informing the public whose behaviours you are trying to understand and predict." (Professor of Social Work Studies)

Despite the importance attached to dissemination, dedicated resources were rare. Most research organisations resourced their dissemination activities from their overall research budget and a number of interviewees commented that research funders tended to expect effective dissemination but rarely allocated a specific budget to it. Only a quarter of the questionnaire respondents could identify dedicated staff time allocated to dissemination activities and this was particularly rare in University Departments.

The fact that researchers were frequently moving on to their next project before completing the developmental work from the previous one was acknowledged to be a problem.

The consortium approach

Increasingly research organisations are seeking to make partnerships more systematic. A number of consortia have now been developed to promote research/practice partnerships, some of them funded by the Department of Health. They are composed of one or more universities and research establishments, together with Local Authority Social Services Departments within the region. They include:

- 'Making Research Count' – a national network, involving Royal Holloway College and the Universities of East Anglia, Leicester, York and Luton. Each of these, either on their own or with the others, links to local authorities within its region.
- Research in Practice – a childcare research implementation centre, working with 60 local authorities and voluntary organisations in England under an initiative of the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS, the Dartington Social Research Unit and the University of Sheffield.
- Centre for Evidence-Based Social Services – University of Exeter.

Improving dissemination

The following suggestions for improving the effectiveness of dissemination are based on material from the focus groups and questionnaire responses.

Issues for research commissioners
- *Timing:* research which delivers solutions at the right time to specific questions facing practitioners and policy-makers is more likely to be used.
- *Relevance to the current policy agenda:* research set in the current policy context is likely to find a ready audience.
- *Allocating dedicated development resources within research funding:* survey respondents regarded lack of resources as the biggest impediment to effective dissemination.
- *Including a clear dissemination strategy at the outset.*
- *Involving professional research users in the commissioning process:* this was thought likely to alter professionals' perceptions of research as elitist with no relevance to their daily practice.
- *Involving service users in the research process:* respondents saw failure to involve relevant research users at an early enough stage in the research process as an impediment to effective dissemination.
- *Commissioning research reviews:* to synthesise and evaluate research.

Issues for researchers
- *Provide accessible summaries of research.*
- *Keep the research report brief and concise.*

- *Publish in journals or publications which are user friendly:* around two-thirds of the research producers who responded to the survey were more likely to publish their research in professional and academic journals. The research users who contributed to the study noted that such publications were difficult to access and such material was seen to impede effective dissemination.
- *Use language and styles of presentation which engage interest.*
- *Target the material to the needs of the audience:* policy-makers and managers preferred bullet-pointed summaries, whereas practitioners and service users valued verbal feedback.
- *Extract the policy and practice implications of research:* where possible, this should be done in partnership with practitioners and policy-makers.
- *Tailor dissemination events to the target audience and evaluate them:* use feedback to inform future dissemination events.
- *Use the media:* relevant journalists need to be engaged to ensure that research messages can be incorporated into the media's schedules.
- *A combination of dissemination methods* was regarded as the best way to maximise effectiveness. These included: newsletters; websites; linking with existing databases; use of different formats (such as audiotapes, videos and CD-ROM); use of print and broadcast media; research syntheses/reviews; involving local practitioners and policy-makers to spell out implications of research; targeted mailing of research summaries to policy-makers and practitioners; invitation seminars; appropriate summaries for service users and user involvement in planning dissemination.
- *Being proactive:* by contacting agencies rather than expecting practitioners, managers and policy-makers to attend national or regional conferences.
- *Understand external factors:* such as political sensitivities, financial and administrative mechanisms.

Issues for practitioners and policy-makers

What can help practitioners and policy-makers make better use of research and ensure that their practice and policy is underpinned by sound research evidence?

- *The role of leadership and senior management* was noted to be crucial in: demonstrating the value of research as a source for new ideas; in accessing and making use of research; in encouraging research by practitioners; and in active collaboration with research producers.
- *Presence of an organisational culture supported by senior management* which recognised the importance of developing evidence-based practice.

- *Facilitation of adequate training and development support* by senior management for their staff; critical appraisal and understanding research methodologies were regarded as skills which would help practitioners make better use of research in their practice.
- *Incorporation of appropriate research skills in basic and advanced courses* would result in practitioners and managers being research-literate and more likely to underpin their practice with sound research.
- *Product or issue 'champions'* who are enthusiastic and have credibility in the organisation can act as a catalyst in promoting integration of available research into practice.
- *Resources linked to research and development need to be protected* and not be the first to be axed in time of resource constraints.
- *Integration of the research and development component in job descriptions* is more likely to lead to acceptance of research and the promotion of a culture which encourages underpinning policy and practice with sound research evidence.
- *Managers can ensure that time is made available within the practitioners' work routines* to enable them to share learning from participation in research projects, or from training on research skills, with their colleagues.

About the study

The review was carried out by Barnardo's Research and Development team, using material from:

- Existing literature on dissemination.
- Questionnaires sent to commissioners and producers of research.
- Interviews with research commissioners, producers, disseminators and users.
- Focus groups carried out in all four UK countries with social work students, social work practice teachers, social work practitioners and managers in the statutory and voluntary sectors.

How to get further information

The full report also includes a summary of resources available which are concerned with evidence based practice in the United Kingdom. To order a copy, contact Barnardo's Child Care Publications, Barnardo's Trading Estate, Paycocke Road, Basildon, Essex, SS14 3DR, Tel: 01268 520224, Fax: 01268 284804 or consult Barnardo's website: www.barnardos.org.uk.