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Understanding Australian Policies on Public Health

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Understanding Australian Policies on Public Health

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Understanding Australian Policies on Public Health

This Academy Paper is the outcome of a Workshop supported by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia in conjunction with Flinders University, Adelaide. The Workshop was held on 12 and 13 November 2015.

Conveners

Professor Fran Baum FASSA, Professor Adam Graycar FASSA and Dr Toni Delany.

Aim

The aim of the workshop was to consider how the application of social and political science theories to the analysis of disease prevention and health promotion policies in Australia could improve the potential for these policies to enhance health and equity. The focus was on how issues do or do not arrive on the policy agenda, how the success or otherwise of policy implementation can be assessed and on examining the role of policy networks in policy formulation and implementation.

Introduction

There is strong, and growing, evidence documenting widening health inequities across the world. Widening gaps in health equity have led to repeated calls for innovative policy approaches that promote health and wellbeing, through action on the social and economic determinants of health to create conditions that are conducive to improved population health, wellbeing and equity (Baum, 2008). The European Union and the World Health Organisation have promoted a focus on the social determinants of health and health equity including through the global Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (on which Baum was a Commissioner). Despite recommendations from this Commission and a range of subsequent national and regional reports on the same topic, evidence indicates that most governments, including in Australia, do not prioritise policies to encourage action on social determinants.

The European Union and the World Health Organisation have also promoted a 'Health in All Policies' (HiAP) approach, which advocates for all sectors of government to take action designed to promote health, wellbeing and equity. This approach is being applied in South Australia and Tasmania. HiAP builds upon a long history of theory and conceptual development in the health promotion movement; such as the concepts of intersectoral action for health, healthy public policy and joined up government. All three of these concepts are underpinned by the idea that the health sector must work with other sectors, particularly within and across governments, to facilitate recognition of the impact that all sectors have on health, to advocate for improved health and to mediate between differing interests across sectors. The quest for better coordinated government policy nationally and locally is elusive, and only limited understanding exists about why it has proved difficult to implement.

The importance of policy on social determinants in the disease prevention and health promotion fields has been documented, but government action has been slow to move away from a focus on direct attempts to change individual behavior – a process described by Popay et al. (2010) as 'lifestyle drift'. Additionally, available evidence, including the work of the Southgate Institute,

suggests that, even when wider social determinants are a focus of public health policies, implementation is not easy and remains marginal to mainstream public sector activity.

It is rare for theoretical insights to be brought to bear on these issues (de Leeuw et al. 2014). After conducting a systematic review of the extent of policy analysis in health promotion literature, Embrett and Randall (2014) concluded, 'Although policy analysis is neither sufficient or necessary for policy adoption it is reasonable to expect that without a firm understanding of the factors affecting the progression of a policy issue/problem onto the policy agenda and beyond it is highly unlikely that we will see any substantial increase in the adoption of healthy public policies'.

Objectives

The specific objectives of the workshop were to:

- Develop theoretical understandings of why disease prevention and health promotion have a marginal position on the political and policy agenda.
- Stimulate in-depth discussion to identify key insights from social and political science theory into factors that shape the implementation of complex policy initiatives aiming to improve health and wellbeing equitably through action on the social determinants of health.
- Apply these insights to practical examples of the implementation of policy approaches designed to improve health (including the South Australian Health in All Policies initiative, national 'Closing the Gap' Policy Initiatives and the NSW Planning Review) to develop improved theoretical understanding of the processes of developing and implementing disease prevention and health promotion policy.
- Encourage debate between political scientists and public health social scientists to improve the application of theoretical perspectives to public health policy issues.

Outcomes

The ideas exchanged during the workshop have several implications for policy and policy relevant research.

1. There is a tendency for policy actors to shift from a social determinants focus within policy documents to individual-level interventions. Within the health promotion community it is necessary to make clear where individual-level interventions can be helpful, but to utilise existing evidence to articulate clearly how and why a population-level approach may be applied. It is also important to conduct further research into why the drift to behaviour interventions occurs.
2. Engaging Aboriginal Australians in the development of health policy is imperative.
3. Disproportionate attention is directed (by policy actors and researchers), towards understanding policy process, and what facilitates and impedes it, rather than towards understanding the substance of policy and what outcomes are achieved. Reliably funded evaluation of policy outcomes is vital to understand how long-term, sustainable improvements in health and equity may be achieved. Furthermore, the effectiveness of current models of intersectoral policy development is still unclear. Rigorous evaluation is required to provide the necessary evidence.

4. To understand the complexities and nuances of policy-making processes it is helpful to combine multiple theories and to draw on the elements that are most relevant to the systems and contexts being studied.
5. It should not be assumed that a large divide still exists between the understandings and expertise of academics and policy actors. This is particularly apparent since many policy actors hold academic degrees, understand research principles and appreciate the potential value of evidence. However, for theory-based research findings to have maximum impact, they need to be conveyed in a way that can be applied practically. This may involve condensed statements of findings followed by clear strategies for action. Highlighting problems without proposing possible strategies is not helpful in stimulating policy action.