

Ethics in WDP research and applying research

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2

Outline of this session

Learning objectives:

- Identify and reflect on ethical issues related to the development of research evidence and its translation to policy and practice



3

Ethics, research and practice

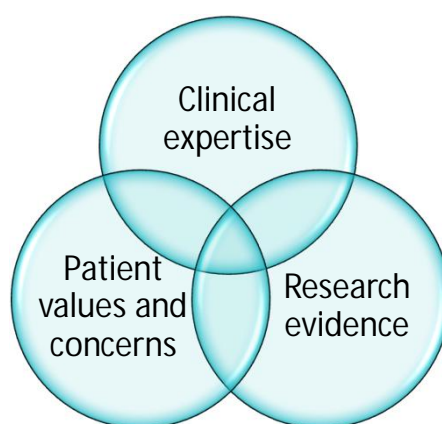
- Ignorance of existing evidence can be blameworthy:

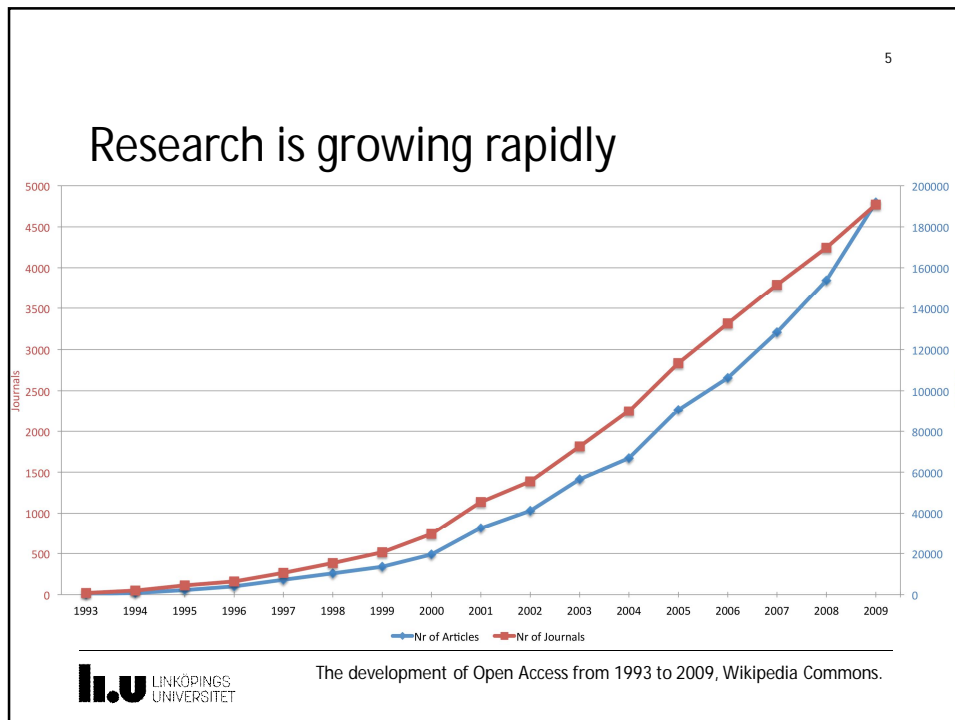
To be in a state of ignorance is to have false beliefs or to lack beliefs one way or another about the way the world works. If I do not have the belief that germs cause disease, and if germs do cause disease, then I am ignorant of the fact that germs cause disease. Now, this would be a grave shortcoming in a twenty-first century physician, but not in one practicing in the fourth century BC, say. This is because my twenty-first century ignorance is individual and my fourth century ignorance is collective. Twenty-five centuries ago no-one knew that germs cause disease; now, everyone (at least everyone who is practicing medicine) does, or should.

- Ignorance reduction is a moral imperative.

4

Evidence-Based Practice





6

How not to drown?

- Possibilities and problems with much research: may reduce ignorance, but may also increase confusion
- As research continuously grow, there is an increasing need for syntheses to summarize the current evidence
- Syntheses may be translated into practice guidelines and recommendations

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7

Where evidence is lacking

- Lack of evidence does not mean that something is wrong
- Policy decisions are not always to be based on evidence, and often take place in situations of uncertainty, where such decisions are normative

8

Evidence-based policy?



9

Research and policy

- Policy-makers want credible policies based on the best knowledge
 - Researchers want societal impact and seek to influence policy by presenting evidence
- a mutually beneficial relationship?

10

What are the underlying assumptions for evidence-based policy?

- Ethical issues around policy may be reduced to questions about evidence
- Research can answer all or most policy questions
- If we do more research, we will minimize the areas where evidence is lacking or is unclear
- Research can provide a value neutral answer to policy questions

(Greenhalgh & Russell 2009)

11

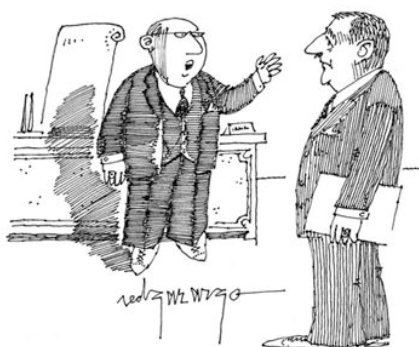
Why not "knowledge translation"?

- Policy-makers have many other goals than clinical effectiveness
- Evidence may be used rhetorically to strengthen ideological positions
- Budgets define what is possible



12

"WHILE DOING THE RESEARCH, KEEP IN MIND THERE ARE ONLY TWO KINDS OF FACTS... THOSE THAT SUPPORT MY POSITION... AND INCONCLUSIVE."



13

Greenhalgh's conclusions

- Expressions such as "knowledge translation" and "getting evidence into practice" are seductive metaphors for the policymaking process.
- Research evidence can and should inform policy judgments—but this evidence does not provide the answer to the ethical question of "what to do" (and in particular, "how to allocate resources")

14

The researcher in the policy process

- If policy should be evidence-based (or informed by research) – who controls the evidence?
- Which scientists do policy-makers listen to?
- How do the agendas differ between different disciplines?
- Are there any fundamental beliefs in your scientific discipline?
- What is, for example, a "social scientist"?
 - Economist?
 - Political scientist?
 - Sociologist?

15

Researchers' dilemmas

- How do you pick your research questions?
- How do they reflect your ideas of what research and policy should focus on?
- Am I "neutral"? If not, in what way? Are some disciplines more neutral than others (e.g., medical professions vs. social sciences)?
- How do I communicate my research findings? The importance of framing and rhetoric, in relation to different stakeholders.

16

Policy-makers' dilemmas

- How do you know what type of evidence to look for?
- What if the evidence is not clear? How to make policies where there is no evidence?
- What if the evidence does not support my ideological position?

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