



Workshop

Towards the Use of Scientific
Evidence in Influencing
Policymaking:
the Role of Media

K2P Workshop

Towards the Use of Scientific Evidence in Influencing Policymaking: the Role of Media

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Description

This document is a summary of the one-day training workshop held by the Knowledge to policy (K2P) Center at the American University of Beirut on April 30, 2014.

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Workshop Summary Report

April 30, 2014

Overview

The role of evidence-informed health policies in improving health, reducing health inequities and contributing to economic development is increasingly recognized. Yet, research evidence is still underutilized in policymaking in Lebanon. Given the important role that media can play in promoting evidence-informed health policies, the Knowledge to Policy (K2P) Center at the American University of Beirut organized a one day interactive workshop on the role of media in influencing policymaking and the role of evidence in health journalism on April 30, 2014. K2P was pleased to welcome 10 journalists that report on health issues from different Lebanese newspapers, news websites, radio and TV.

The objectives of the workshop were to: highlight the important role of media in health policymaking and discuss strategies to improve the interaction between researchers and media, the access of journalists to scientific evidence and the quality of reporting of research evidence particularly those tackling health issues.

The main themes of the discussions were: the role of media in health policymaking, factors influencing the use of evidence in health journalism (facilitators and barriers) and strategies and recommendations to enhance the use of evidence.

The Role of Media in Policymaking

Participants agreed on the important role the media can play in influencing policymaking in Lebanon but also stressed on a number of factors downsizing this role. The political context in Lebanon has a great impact on journalism and on health policymaking. Politics and politicians influence what and how media tackle health issues. Journalists reported that the freedom of media is constrained by political factors.

Another factor influencing the role of media in health policymaking is the influence of pharmaceutical companies. Pharmaceutical companies funds studies and conferences and provide journalists with evidence as a part of its marketing strategy. Journalists don't trust them but these companies approach the media and provide them with the material they need to write

on health issues. The interests of pharmaceutical company and the politicians is highly influencing and directing the media and health policies.

Factors Influencing the Use of Evidence in Health Journalism

Participants acknowledged the importance of evidence-informed health journalism given the role of media in shaping public opinion, medical practice and health policies. They agreed on number of factors that influence the use of evidence in health journalism.

The participants raised the issue of **credibility** as a main challenge influencing the use of evidence in health journalism. They lack a credible and objective source of evidence that they can rely on. They raised the question of “who we should trust?” Journalists prefer to get their evidence from academic and private institutions since they don’t trust public institutions and pharmaceutical companies. They recognize the responsibility of the media towards the public thus they demand a credible source of evidence that they can trust. The participants mentioned that it is not only the role of the media when it comes to promote the use of evidence in health journalism and improve the quality of health reporting it is also the role of the researchers. It is a mutual responsibility between researchers and the media. Researchers should approach the media and provide them with studies and talk their language.

Journalists also stressed the issue of **time** as a major barrier to constrain them from reporting on scientific research evidence. They don’t have time to search, read, analyze and report research studies. They just need a rapid response that is why they rely on experts’ opinion as their main source of evidence. Participants mentioned another reason for relying on experts. They reported that the editors and the public trust physicians and experts more than they trust journalists when it comes to reporting on health issues. This is another factor influencing how media report on health issue and what type of evidence they use.

Another issue raised by participants is the **lack of specialization** in health journalism in Lebanon. Journalists are not trained on how to access and report research evidence. They lack technical capacity to find, translate and understand research. In addition, the concept of health journalism is still not well established among the media, the public and policymakers.

Participants mentioned that their main source of research studies is the researchers. They don’t have the skills or the institutional capacity to access databases. Most databases need paid registration which is not provided by their institutions and beyond their capacities to afford. Journalists also shared their frustrations about the lack context-specific evidence. They show the need to contextualize the research evidence.

The facilitators and barriers are summarized in the table below:

| Facilitators | Barriers |
|--|---|
| - Interaction and personal communication between researchers and journalists | - Lack of time |
| - Short and easy to understand documents | - No specialization in health journalism |
| - Credible source of information | - Difficult language of research |
| - Context-specific evidence | - Lack of skills and institutional capacity to access databases |
| - Rapid Response | - Political influences |

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

During the discussion on how to enhance the use of evidence in health journalism and the quality of health reporting and how to improve the relationship between academia and media, journalists presented a number of recommendations:

- Integrate health journalism in the curriculum of media degree programs in universities
- Integrate “the role of media” as a learning outcome in Public Health programs (e.g. MPH) to prepare researchers on how to deal with media
- Build personal relationship and enhance communication between researchers and media
- Provide media with short and user-friendly briefs written in a simple, easy to understand language
- Understand the language of media
- Contextualize the evidence
- Provide the journalists with a rapid response given their time constraints
- Train journalists on how to access and report evidence
- Provide the media with a list of researchers and experts in different health fields

-➤ Promote the concept of health journalism among the different stakeholders
-➤ Developing a repository of studies conducted in Lebanon

K2P and the Media

Participants highlighted on the important role that K2P can play in bridging the gap between the media and the research worlds, promoting the use of evidence in health journalism and improving the quality of health reporting. They agreed on that K2P should establish itself as a credible center that the media can rely on as a source of evidence. They suggested building strong relation between K2P and the “Journalists Syndicate”.

As a step to provide media with evidence, K2P director presented a K2P product developed specifically to enhance the use of evidence in media and provide them with rapid response which the “K2P Media Bite”. Participants appreciated the availability of such a short concise and easy to understand research summary. Two main suggestions were raised from the discussion about the Media Bite:

- 1- To quantify the results: include more numbers and statistics
- 2- To contextualize the evidence reported in the media bite
- 3- To translate the term Media Bite to Arabic as “موجزات علمية”

K2P director and the Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences who are representing the academia in this workshop admit that it is also the responsibility of the researchers to work with the media towards improving the use of evidence in health journalism and the quality of health reporting. They acknowledged that there should be a mutual effort from the side of researchers and the media towards that end.

Dr. John Lavis, Director of McMaster Health Forum presented the experience of his center in working with media. McMaster Health Forum provided training to journalists in Canada and recommended them experts. The role of the center is to provide support to those journalists. McMaster has built personal relationship and partnerships with some of the health journalists. Dr. Lavis mentioned that promoting the use of evidence in health journalism will require enthusiastic journalists that are willing to collaborate with researchers as it is the case in Canada. He presented the example of an enthusiastic journalist called Julia Belluz that has a special column on health called “Science-Ish”. This column checks the latest health headlines made by politicians, healthcare leaders and other journalists against the best available research evidence and holds them accountable for any ill-informed public statements.

Conclusion

The role of media in influencing policymaking through evidence-informed health journalism is still limited given the number of restrictions reported by the participants. Participants agreed that researchers and journalists should collaborate to have greater impact on policymaking. On the other hand, researchers should understand the world of media so they design context-specific strategies to enhance the relationship between academia and media and improve the quality of health reporting.



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