



Learning Brief

How can we act on information we don't have?

Information and communication needs in health policy decisions in Ghana

The need to ensure that policies are based on informed decision making has prompted the Health Research Unit (HRU) in Ghana to conduct a study to assess the context in which health professionals, health policy makers, and health researchers seek information, which information sources they access, and the factors that influence the use of information resulting from research.

To address this, the researchers in Ghana chose Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and in-depth interviews as the two main data collection techniques. This facilitated dialogue around information needs and discussions on the perceptions of the various stakeholders on the use of information as tool to achieve better performance. Respondents were from national, regional and district levels, and included policy makers, health managers, health researchers, and health workers. In total over 200 people were interviewed and around 100 participated in FGD. This Learning Brief presents some of the results and conclusions of this study and tries to extract the main lesson learned.

Decision-making and use of research

The study results show that research information is considered essential to the process of decision-making at all levels. Despite acknowledging the importance, the use of research as a basis for policy formulation is very limited. Reasons given include: the lack of relevance of research conducted for policy making, the research results being made available at the wrong time, and difficulties in accessing data and research results. Many respondents themselves had been involved in conducting research. However, when it comes to planning, 'research consciousness' is not very high, resulting in a lack of resources allocated to research and information-related costs (e.g. health literature).

Researchers should see themselves as agents of change and should be innovative in meeting the needs of the various target audiences. The question is whether researchers have the communication and marketing skills to effectively disseminate research

findings to a heterogeneous audience and entice policy makers to take action on their recommendations. This calls for training in communication. However, the problem is not only the absence of information or communication skills but also the inability to harness information resources for effective use in national health development. A major task for the health sector is therefore not only to identify the needs of policy makers, health providers, health researchers, and users of health care, but also to identify and select useful sources of information already available to meet these needs. There is a need for clear strategies for collection, storage and distribution of research information and health literature among policy makers, health providers and researchers within Ghana.

Information needs

Information needs are not static and differ according to professional scope. For example, clinical practitioners need information on how to handle specific diagnostic or therapeutic problems in patient management; public health workers need information on epidemiological, community and hospital data; decision-makers need knowledge and skills in research methods in order to allow them to assess proposals and judge the relevance of data for their policy-making; medical assistants and nurses might need socio-cultural information about the way of life in the communities they work, etc. The study concludes that it is therefore important to assess the information needs of health professionals periodically to enable planners to design appropriate and coherent national health information and communication strategies.

Information sources and information seeking behaviour

In the traditional Ghanaian society information is disseminated through story telling and town criers. In this process the source of information is associated with the elder of lineage, making age an important factor for the credibility of the information. Modern forms of communication (including TV, radio and the Internet) have to some extent replaced the traditional

sources of information, but the seeking of information from elder colleagues still takes a very prominent place as an information source. Also, the hierarchical nature of the Ministry of Health and the centralised nature of policy-making makes it necessary for health professionals at various levels to rely on their superiors as a major source of information.

Another major source of information is the numerous workshops and meetings. Though these can be very useful as medium for sharing information there are several limitations to this approach. Only a few people can participate, the time spent in workshops can be enormous (respondents said they spent 12-20 weeks per year in workshops), and participants in workshops often do not share their newly acquired knowledge with others. A way to improve the access to information provided during workshops is to invite the media (radio, TV and newspapers) to these events. This can be very useful in creating awareness of new developments and newly available knowledge, but cannot replace the need for more detailed information.

The Internet is valued by policy makers, regional health management teams and researchers as an important and reliable source of information. Barriers in its utilisation include the lack of access to computers, telephones, electricity and funds to Internet access. In addition, the technical ability to use the Internet is insufficient. Many of the district managers and almost all providers at sub-district level lack access to the Internet.

Lesson learned

The needs assessment conducted shows a mismatch between supply and demand: information needs of policy makers differ from the research results provided by researchers, or information needed is not available through accessible sources. Improving communication methods is therefore critical for research and development. Communication systems need to be developed, including presentation and packaging of information, dissemination of this information, and storing the information in accessible places. Regular needs assessments will show whether the gap between supply and demand is diminishing, and will allow for informed decisions related to adjustments to the information gathered and communication strategies.

Dissemination of results

Of course, a study on communication and information needs and practices should provide practical examples of how health research information can be disseminated and utilised. A variety of approaches, depending upon the target groups, have been chosen to transmit the results and recommendations.

Executive summaries of the study will be presented to senior policy makers at the national level. Policy makers at the regional level will receive electronic and hard copies of the complete report. A consultative meeting for policy makers will assist in establishing policy guidelines for research communication and for sharing new knowledge in health.

Each region has its own Newsletter, which is distributed widely to health staff at regional and community level. Regions will be encouraged to utilise this tool to disseminate results of the study. Also, the quarterly public health magazine 'The Health Courier' will be used to disseminate the results to the wider health community and the general public. The HRU has already established arrangements with the magazine to publish its research findings.

Besides these written tools, drama will also be used as dissemination tool. The Health Drama Troupe, in collaboration with the HRU, will develop plays that promote the use of evidence-based information in decision-making. This will be captured on videotapes, to be used by health workers and their institutions.

Reference

Adjei S, Cofie P, et al. (2001) *How can we act on information we don't know? A study into information and communication needs and use of research information in health policy decisions in Ghana*. Health Research Unit, Ministry of Health, Ghana.

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