

Evidence Informed Practice

This paper was prepared by The Benevolent Society for use by the managers of its services working with women, children, families, older people and communities across New South Wales. The purpose of the paper was to support managers in planning for and implementing a key element of their business plans which is to create and deliver leading edge programs and service. In the current year of the business planning process managers were asked to focus on the issue of evidence informed practice in their services. This paper aimed to introduce the concepts of evidence informed practice to managers and provide some practical ideas of applying these concepts to their work.

Evidence Informed Practice: what is it and where did it come from?

Evidence informed (sometimes called evidence based) practice is a concept which has been increasingly cited in policy development in recent years. It is based on the principle that the development and implementation of interventions is informed by the most current, relevant and reliable evidence about their effectiveness. There are numerous definitions of evidence informed practice, one commonly used definition is: 'the integration of experience, judgement and expertise with the best available external evidence from systematic research' .

The origins of evidence informed practice lie in the health field and the development of evidence based medicine. This movement was driven by organisations like the Cochrane Collaboration who undertake systematic research reviews to help ensure that healthcare decisions throughout the world are informed by high quality, timely research evidence. A similar organisation, the Campbell Collaboration , now exists to prepare, maintain and disseminate systematic reviews of studies of social and educational interventions.

Why is it important for The Benevolent Society?

The Benevolent Society has a history of delivering high quality, innovative services and our strategic plan is committed to creating and delivering leading edge programs and services.

In order to know whether the services we deliver are leading edge we not only need to know whether our services are having the desired impact but also how they add value to other similar services which are being delivered. Furthermore in order to create new leading edge services we need to know what other services are currently being delivered, the effectiveness of these services and where there are gaps or evolving needs for new services.

In order to do this we need to ensure that the services we deliver are informed by evidence of what we and others know is effective. This means not only ensuring we are generating and have access to evidence about the effectiveness of our own services but also that we are using current evidence about the effectiveness of other activities which are relevant to the services we deliver.

What is evidence?

Evidence can be generated from a range of sources including but not limited to:

- Academic journals;
- Statistics;
- Research and evaluation reports;
- Systematic reviews of research;
- Data gathered from our own services;
- Knowledge of experienced workers.

Well documented systems exist to help us decide what evidence to select and apply to our practice. These systems explore the reliability and validity of evidence including the rigour of the methodology used to collect it. Within the medical evidence based practice field a typical hierarchy of evidence, from most to least rigorous, is:

1. multiple randomized control trials (RCT), preferably large ones, suitably meta analysed;
2. at least one properly designed RCT of appropriate size;
3. well-controlled trials without randomisation;
4. well-designed cohort or case control studies;
5. multiple time series or dramatic results from uncontrolled experiments;
6. opinions of respected authorities based on clinical evidence, descriptive studies or expert committee;
7. small uncontrolled case series and samples.

Applying such a complex set of criteria in the context of our services may not be necessary or appropriate but when selecting evidence to inform your practice you may want to ask some of the following questions to make a judgement about its value:

- how relevant is the evidence to what we are seeking to understand or decide?
- how representative is the evidence of the population that concerns us?
- how reliable, how well-founded – theoretically, empirically – is it?

How can we access evidence?

It's difficult to know where to find the latest research and evidence and often time consuming to look for it. Research staff in The Benevolent Society keep up to date with important research and policy developments which emerge and are a good source of this information. They also have access to a number of research databases and can assist in undertaking literature reviews and background research. There are a number of useful, free web resources such as Google scholar <http://scholar.google.com/> for searching academic literature and websites providing alerts about recent policy and research such as Australian Policy Online www.apo.org.au/. Colleagues are also a very valuable source of information about latest research and policy developments.

How might we generate our own evidence?

As we create and deliver leading edge services it is important that we are documenting our own practice to help generate our organisational knowledge as well as contributing to the general evidence base around what works. The main means of achieving this is through the evaluation of our services as well as undertaking more general research around their effectiveness. Through our strategic plan we are committed to developing evaluation and research capacity and systems across The Benevolent Society which will help to achieve these aims.

How can we use the evidence?

Evidence can be used to inform the full cycle of service delivery. Again this can be evidence generated externally or internally from our own services. Evidence can be used to inform:

- Service conceptualisation and design
- Service implementation and review
- Service evaluation
- Service redesign

Some tips for developing evidence informed practice

Keeping on top of the latest research and evidence around our practice is a daunting and difficult task especially when we are concentrating on the day to day task of delivering leading edge services. These are some examples of ways to incorporate thinking about this as part of our day to day work:

- Sign up to e-mail alerts from policy and research websites
- Schedule slots in meetings to discuss any latest research which you or your colleagues have read
- Talk to research staff about the resources they have available around latest research and policy developments in your field
- Talk to colleagues about what they are doing to encourage evidence informed practice
- If you are not doing so already seek support to develop and undertake an evaluation of your services.

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