

Notes from Session on “Ways of Getting Research off the Ground in AOD Practice” convened by Peter Adams

This session sought to harness the experience and understanding of participants in exploring ideas for advancing research in AOD service settings.

Peter Adams provided a brief preamble that summarized his presentation at last year’s Collaborative symposium that emphasized:

- AOD research is challenged by spanning a wide range of academic disciplines from the molecular to the macro-political.
- AOD service research is difficult to sustain from a university base because of challenges in connecting with the realities of service environments.
- AOD services that seek to form research units seldom last long because the researchers involved become isolated and their work struggles to achieve relevance in service-oriented systems.
- The way forward would be to explore possibilities of joint governance as occurs with practitioner Masters theses, joint appointments and university/service partnerships.

Discussion focus:

Participants were divided into three round-table groups and asked to discuss a hypothetical service research question regarding the following:

1. What would it take to form a research team?
2. What are the likely obstacles?
3. How would these obstacles be overcome?

The three research question scenarios were:

- a. A community AOD outpatient service wants to set up and evaluate a strategy for improving earlier engagement in help seeking
- b. An AOD service is seeking to develop a process for screening and responding to the needs of clients with brain injuries.
- c. An AOD service is wanting to work out better ways of engaging and responding to the needs of affected family members.

Main themes:

Observations:

- Research teams need to clarify their intentions right from the start.
- Service research involves a continuum of intensity and design possibilities, from a small impact evaluation of a service modification to a full-blown randomized trial, to everything in between.
- It takes time to scope, design and find resources for research project and the scale of this is often seen as beyond the capacity of practitioners and their services.

- Research requires several levels of activity such as a small steering group to implement a project and a wider advisory group that connects with key stakeholders (e.g. consumers)

Barriers Identified:

- Difficult to initiate and build relationships with researchers when the businesses and incentives are so different. For example, researcher interest in methodological quality and publications may not be shared by services.
- Practitioners not supportive of a research culture and some may see research as an imposition and that they are being exploited by researchers (one-way street).
- Addiction research not seen as a “sexy” area or one that attracts resources.
- Service research culture and value of research needs to be supported strongly by service leadership and this is often missing.
- Practitioners lack allocated time for research activity and are seldom encouraged to get involved by their line managers.
- Ethics and management approvals often seen as a difficult hurdle, which puts practitioners off research involvements.

Opportunities:

- Building up a culture of reflection, enquiry and innovation as part of “business as usual”.
- Improved support for practitioners to pursue research qualifications with active encouragement by team leaders and managers.
- Services look at ways to encourage research teams and reducing the red-tape and other obstacles to research activity.
- “Think tanks” within services could help in defining research questions and identifying novel projects.
- The increasing recognition in services of “quality improvement” could form a base for supporting research and evaluation.
- Incentives for service research could be supported through performance reviews, awards, specific events and profiling.
- Include researchers as part of the governance structure of the organization.
- Consumer representation could be sought on research teams.
- Research projects should include a plan on how the outputs are going to influence or be implemented in service settings.

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