Reviewer's report

Title: Describing the impact of health research: a Research Impact Framework

Version: 3 Date: 29 August 2006

Reviewer: Mark Petticrew

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Describing the impact of health research: a Research Impact Framework

This seems to be a helpful contribution to helping researchers and others think about what the impact of their research might be in different areas. However it covers such a broad range of impacts that some of specific details about those impacts and how they might be conceptualised and measured needs to be filled in.

There are also a few places where more methodological information would help the reader.

Areas where more information is needed are listed below.

- Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1. The introduction could provide more context than at present. The diffusion literature is mentioned in passing, but it would be helpful to put the paper in the context of the literature on the general relationship between research and practice/policy (Weiss, Nutley etc). Probably when most researchers think about their research, they are thinking of it in these terms – but this is not referred to here (though Weiss does come in later).

The paper also doesn’t really discuss the complexities in assessing (or prioritising) impacts, or any of the possible competing models or views – for example, in one view, perhaps research does not have to have an “impact” at all – perhaps it just needs to “be there”, providing general illumination...

2. More information is needed on the project methods. The LSHTM projects, which are used as data to help develop the framework, are not well described, nor are the means by which the data from the case studies were analysed. The empirical analysis is mentioned on page 10, but there is not much detail, and the reader is referred to another report which is available on request; but this information should probably be included in the paper. In other places the LHSTM research is cited without the supporting data (e.g., quotes, or other information) or findings really being described (e.g., page 21, second last paragraph).

3. There are numerous references to areas in which research can have an impact, but specific examples are not often given, and where they are, there is often very little detail – e.g., page 28 (Climate Change); page 21 (Educational use)

4. Page 14: Research methods: one of the most important areas of impact seems to be missing – filling meaningful gaps in the evidence base (i.e., testing hitherto untested hypotheses).

Discretionary Revisions

5. The discuss of the framework seems biased towards positive impacts of research; adverse effects are not explicitly discussed much (– there are a few passing references, and harmful effects are mentioned on page 42 – but may be worth more discussion and/or examples).

6. There is no differentiation between “primary” and “secondary” impacts – for example differentiating between the main intended impacts, (e.g., on health) and “spillover” effects - would it be helpful to address this issue in more detail in the discussion – whether impacts can/should be prioritised? At the minute, the framework is presented as a wide range of possible impacts, and it is therefore possible for a researcher to take any piece of research, and through a process of post hoc rationalization, point out that their research
has had “an impact”. But does that impact actually matter? Do some impacts matter more than others? If you spend £5m doing an RCT to show that an intervention is effective, but the only impact of that research is on the educational curriculum, or on the arts, then that might not be as “important” as an impact on health. Perhaps this issue of prioritization is an issue for “further research”.