Reviewer’s report

Title: Lessons from the evaluation of the UK’s NHS R&D Implementation Methods Programme

Version: 1 Date: 9 August 2006

Reviewer: Heather Buchan

Reviewer’s report:

General

The general topic of this paper – what was found in the evaluation of the UK’s NHS R&D Implementation methods program – would certainly be of interest to the general readership of the Journal. However as the paper is currently written it lacks some of the detail that would make the paper valuable and of help to potential readers outside of the UK. My suggestions fall into 3 areas:

1. Provide a better description of the program itself as this would help readers unfamiliar with the program.
2. Put a greater focus on what was learnt about how end users of the research should be involved in these types of programs (and their evaluation).
3. More clarity and discussion around how the outputs of the program had an impact on implementation methods research rather than the specific subject research e.g. effective practices in midwifery.

I enjoyed reading the paper.

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

Basic details about the program should be explained. While in some contexts this would not be important, it is necessary when the purpose of the paper is to identify lessons that can aid the development of more effective research in this field for future. I would have found it helpful to have a short explanation of why there was a separate Advisory Group and Commissioning Group, what was the composition and what each contributed. There is a section (p6) entitled “Composition of the Commissioning Group” which identifies some difficulties that arose in the tasks the commissioning group was faced with but the paper does not describe the composition of the group. I am not sure that Table 1 as it currently stands is a useful addition to the manuscript. It sets out a timetable of events connected to the Implementation methods program but many of the questions that it raises are not answered in the text. For example: why was the funding for the program capped & the commissioning group disbanded? This is mentioned as being an issue that precluded a co-ordinated approach to dissemination (p7) and mention is made of the radical rethinking of the role of national R & D programs (p9) but it is not clear whether the Implementation Methods Program was simply caught up in these larger changes or whether there were specific issues. The effect that the withdrawal of 40% of the originally allocated funding (if I am reading the table correctly) may have had on the overall shape of the program is not discussed. It is not clear how the second round of commissioning was managed if the commissioning group was disbanded. The timetable of events does not tell us what timelines the research itself was required to meet.

It would be helpful to have a list of the types of papers that were commissioned by the Advisory Group, the priority topics that were established and the research that was funded in each topic area. While this adds considerable detail to the paper, it could be provided in table form and would enable the authors to be much more specific about some of the lessons that can be drawn. The authors mention that there was considerable variation between the priority areas and that 20 topics were probably too many. Some issues are raised about the nature of the topics, and it is mentioned that some areas were simply not well enough developed to fund projects, but that the specific areas this applied to were not clear at the start of the program. No detail or examples are provided. This means that the conclusions about this are very general and of limited value to the reader. It would also help the reader understand which implementation methods were studied as part of this R & D program something that is currently unclear.

The two specific examples given are very helpful and of interest. They are clearly success stories of the program. While I recognize it may be difficult to do, it would be useful to have some tactful exploration of
areas where the research was not as successful in terms of impact and what lessons could be drawn from these examples.

A central issue is raised by the authors on p5 and is worthy of much more discussion in terms of how the program and the evaluation were conducted— they mention that in assessing impact of the program, there is confusion about whether the findings about the methods used to transfer research evidence had an impact or whether the research topic that was the vehicle for the methods study had an impact. While it is identified as an issue it isn’t clear whether the evaluation explored this aspect. Do the outputs of this program relate to the use of implementation methods (with respect to policy and practice), rather than use of known effective methods of care in specific subject areas e.g. effectiveness of certain aspects of midwifery or perinatal care. It would help if Table 5 could show us what kinds of impacts on policy and practice are said to have occurred.

Neither is it clear whether some of the other outputs contribute to implementation methods research - what, for example, were the aims of the research where further funding was secured (Table 3)? Are the researchers produced as a result of this program people who are contributing towards implementation methods research or are they undertaking different types of research in, for example, the clinical specialty areas of interest (Table 4)?

The authors mention that the response from 3 electronic surveys to potential users of IMP research were too low to provide results that could be widely generalized. In a way, the report of the evaluation replicates a problem identified in the program itself - it does not place enough emphasis on the end users of the research (need for a communication strategy p7). The need to consider potential users of research (presumably NHS policy makers, managers and clinicians although this is not clarified in the paper - educators are mentioned in case study 2 but otherwise neglected in considering the outputs of the program) is a central issue both for an Implementation Methods Program and in the evaluation of a program that was designed to explore in depth the issues of research implementation. At present this is not given enough focus in the paper and the report on what was learned lacks richness e.g. the paper states commissioning groups should agree protocols at their first meeting to cover the role and remit of members etc but it would have been very helpful to find out more about the reflections of the advisory and commissioning groups on this issue and specifically how they felt that potential users of the research should be involved in assessment, communication and dissemination.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.