

Science Informing Public Policy: Beyond What Counts as Evidence

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Some public policy questions are principled, or used to be: is equality of opportunity more important than equality of outcome? How present should governments be in the everyday lives of citizens: who we sleep with and how, how we punish our children, what we watch for entertainment? Are national borders more important than global citizenship? Others, in contrast, are empirical: what effects are policies having? Are we getting healthier, more equal, more productive, and what is making us so? Can the world bear our weight? Increasingly, however, these distinctions seem less useful. The rise of evidence based policy places new obligations on the relationship between research and policy—while policy must be informed by research, so too research must be useful to policy.

So the question as to whether or not policy should be based on evidence has been answered in the affirmative, and evidence is the only game in town. But with that consensus comes questions about the relationship between government and science; and about the public trust in government, and in science; and about the allocation of scarce resources; and about the marketplace in scientific knowledge. Our workshop started not from the question of whether policy should be based on evidence. Instead, we were provoked by a sense of intrigue about the traffic between policy and science, and between publics and experts. Our experiences in policy research, and in the uses of science by policy, had led us to conclude that public policy is informed by evidence and by science, but also very clearly the outcome of many other factors, political, economic, and social. Over the course of the workshop, we discussed the central importance of public engagement in science, and scientists' engagement in the public domain.

This mutual engagement is evident in emphatic instances of behaviour change brought about by scientific evidence, but also in instances where scientific consensus has been met with scepticism. In the area of lung cancer in relation to smoking, 30 years of public policy in Australia (and elsewhere) has had a marked impact. Evidence has clearly informed and is continuing to inform public policy with regard to tobacco smoking. In HIV and AIDS, too, there has been a measure of success in lowering the HIV incidence in the population. Again evidence has informed effective public policy. On the other hand, in climate change, scientific evidence appears to have had only minimal impact. At the workshop, Robert Manne spoke of the rise in climate change denialism. In Australia and elsewhere, there has been a weak response and the climate change issue appears to have failed to engage the public in debate. Why, Robert Manne asks, when there is scientific consensus over the question of global warming, is there resistance to it? He notes that in the English-speaking world there now exists

a fiercely partisan political struggle over whether or not the consensual conclusions of the climate scientists are believable.

Why is there such disconnection between evidence and policy in some areas and not in others? One part of the answer lies in the successful engagement of the public in some cases and not others. Clearly in the areas of smoking/ lung cancer and in HIV, the public has been engaged. In the former case, mass social marketing, peer pressure and changes in the law, in the latter community engagement and involvement in the development of effective harm reduction strategies and their promotion. In climate change, there has been no such effective public engagement – and indeed, denialism among many.

Another part of the answer lies in our evolving understandings, and arguments, about what ‘evidence’ looks like. What constitutes evidence and what should count as evidence was discussed by Kane Race, Celia Roberts and Niamh Stephenson. Celia spoke of birth politics in Europe and activists critique of medical definitions and practices of birth and the need to engage with the recipients (actual and potential) of research. Kane argued that the ‘definitive’ knowledge of sexual activities as fixed objects purportedly produced by science deters engagement in sexual knowledges. He went on to consider the utility of ‘anecdote’ as a research device that has the potential to intervene in productive ways in current arrangements of intimacy. Niamh spoke of the contingent nature of emerging infectious diseases and the need for public health to grapple with ‘fluid’, i.e. unstable, objects.

In general, it is important for researchers and policy makers to acknowledge that evidence of ‘what works’ may vary from context to context and over time. It is not the case that all evidence is of the sort that the so-called ‘hard’ sciences, including biomedicine, privilege. With reference to the social and cultural factors that affect how effective any particular ‘intervention’ takes, Declan Kuch questioned the ‘linear model’ of innovation that structures energy research. This model views technology as an intermediary between Science and a passive society, obscuring the different ways industries negotiate socially contested terrain such as risk management through their industrial practices. When collaboration becomes necessary – with Carbon Capture and Storage research, for example – the embeddedness of this view of the world becomes clearer. Sue Kippax questioned the growing reliance in biomedicine on randomised controlled trials. David Wilson spoke about the move to cost effectiveness as measures of ‘what works’ used by policy makers in the field of HIV.

With reference to Indigenous policies, Ilan Katz and Margaret Raven spoke about the use of government enquiries for building evidence for policy development, and growing recognition among

researchers and policy makers alike of the importance of community consultation in gathering evidence. From the perspective of a maker of public policy, Darryl O'Donnell in exploring how claims of 'evidence-based policy' stack up against real world social and political messiness, spoke of the ways in which contemporary public administration practice sits uneasily alongside social science.

A third reason for the differences in the status across policy arenas is the labour of not only producing evidence but in getting it heard. Reviewing data from a study of leading peer-voted Australian researchers in six fields in public health, Simon Chapman speaking from the perspective of a scientist, focused on the increasing understanding among researchers of the need to actively promote their findings. If there was ever a golden age for research, when the researcher could expect to be revered by publics and influential in policy as an entitlement, those days are surely gone. Scepticism, plurality, complexity, and a crowded field all work to make the seemingly straightforward task of translating evidence into policy, anything but.

As with all golden ages, it is probably not so necessary to mourn its passing. Recognising the messy, social and political worlds of both policy *and* science is a far more engaging prospect than the idea of researcher as god. Yet the urgency of our most pressing public policy questions demands both principled and empirical responses. The workshop spoke of the lives saved by policies that engaged and respected the public, especially in the areas of smoking and HIV (and, as Darryl O'Donnell reminded us, early policy responses to HIV were precisely not evidence based). It also spoke of those lives lost and incalculably immiserated by policies that ignore both evidence and principle. When it comes to understanding science, and publics, and policy, and what happens between them, we have much to learn.

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