

Engaging with health care professionals to integrate health psychology research into practice

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Health psychology research has increased its profile in recent years, as we are publishing more research articles than ever and have an increasing number of host journal titles to take our work to. The European Health Psychology Society (EHPS) community presents a wealth of high quality research every year at the conference. The main audience of our conference and journal articles is health psychology researchers, which is positive because we are creating an incremental science that pushes the agendas of open science and novel methodologies whilst integrating cognition, emotion, behaviour and physiological processes. However, creating multidisciplinary research teams that potentially offer pathways to embedding research into health care practice can be challenging for those of us working in predominantly health psychology teams. What unites the health psychology research community is the challenge of designing, conducting and reporting research that can benefit communities through the application of our research in practice to improve patient care or public health. We have a research-practice implementation gap (Dubois, Gomez, Carlson & Russell, 2020; Haines, Kuruville & Borchert, 2004): a healthy supply of high quality health psychology research, most of which is mainly read by other health psychology researchers. Few health psychology researchers actively work on the implementation of their research and evidence into practice to improve the delivery of routine care and health care systems. Presseau, Byrne-Davies, Holtham et al., (2020)'s

conceptual review of the translation of health behaviour change research into practice argues for a greater focus on implementation alongside innovation in health psychology to promote wider-scale impact. Their recommendations include: 1) enhancing systematic reviews conduct by reporting health behaviour change interventions with a discussion of implementation readiness; 2) considering implementation at the early stages of research; 3) extend and develop health behaviour change science to understand and change the behaviour of individuals at multiple levels to enable and deliver health behaviour change interventions in practice; 4) develop implementation science capacity within health psychology.

In this article, I will outline some of the solutions to addressing the research-practice gap in health psychology, and provide ways in which we can start to consider how our research agendas may align with health care practice and the work of practitioners involved in the organisation and delivery of care. This article is a reflective piece by an academic-practitioner in health psychology designed to give my insights into the opportunities to engage with health care professionals (HCPs), based on my experiences as a Health Psychologist working in a Cardiovascular Diseases hospital clinic, and as a University researcher and academic involved in developing and testing health psychology interventions and training future psychologists. This article is intended to help you reflect on your implementation strategies by considering the ways in which you may be able to engage with local HCPs and services and how they

might benefit from your research and enhance the work you do.

Opportunities for engaging with HCPs throughout the research process

Health care professionals (HCPs) are key stakeholders in research as they can play a vital role in the evaluation of evidence and practical constraints, which is a central component of the new framework for developing and evaluating complex interventions (Skivington et al., 2021). The first step to HCP engagement is to think of the unique selling point of your research and have clear reasons for wanting to work with HCPs. This might be informed by the stage of your research. Presseau et al (2020) recommend considering implementation at the early stages of your research. At the ideas stage of research design, you might want clinical insight into a specific long term health condition, the treatments, or the way in which care is currently delivered. Or, you may want to know what the current challenges are in delivering care, particularly in these times where the health care system is rapidly evolving to respond to the demands of the pandemic (Douglas et al., 2020) and an increasing aging population managing multiple long term conditions (Dhere, 2016; Parker et al., 2019). If you are at the analysis or dissemination stage of a project, you might be looking for ways to apply your research in practice. In which case, start to consider where your research might have the most impact and clinical relevance. Your work may have relevance for informing care pathways, the delivery of care, clinical assessment/measurement methods or public health and policy. Forming HCP collaborations at the early stages of the research may be useful for developing ideas for future projects. Developing long-term collaborative

partnerships with HCPs through establishing ideas for a series of related studies in a specific area can also lead to greater overall research impact.

Engaging with Psychologists working in Practice

One of the clearest routes to embedding your research into practice and creating impact would be to engage with a Practitioner Health Psychologist or other Practitioner Psychologists, such as Clinical, Counselling, Forensic Psychologists that work with a client group or health care setting that closely relates to your research interests. Practitioner Health Psychologists typically provide direct clinical care for clients across a wide range of health conditions, including cardiovascular diseases (including cardiovascular rehabilitation, hypertension management, surgical interventions etc.), pain management, cancer, diabetes, sexual health/HIV, chronic fatigue syndrome, organ transplant, weight management, burns and plastic surgery, neuropsychology and cystic fibrosis (Division of Health Psychology, British Psychological Society, n.d). Practitioner Psychologists are employed across different health care settings, including general practice (primary care) and hospital service (specialist day clinics and surgical/treatment wards), public health teams and government.

As well as providing direct clinical care for individuals and groups, practitioner psychologists are often research active, but commonly report challenges in research capacity (McHugh, Corcoran & Byrne, 2016). HCPs often struggle to fit research into limited time, with limited funds, often without the support or encouragement of surrounding research teams. HCPs can benefit from health psychology researchers' research expertise and supervision, while researchers can benefit from clinicians' practical experience and knowledge, along with potential links to service users

interested in contributing to research studies (Lampropoulos et al., 2002). Developing collaborations with those working in research and practice would inform health psychology research from a clinical care view point, thus enhancing the likelihood of the research findings and implications being adopted by other practitioner psychologists.

Embedding your research into direct clinical care and health care practice are not the only pathways to impact. Additional opportunities to influence practice through your research can be created by supporting psychologists working in practice with the advisory role that they have. Practitioner psychologists offer advice and consultation on patients' psychological care to members of the multidisciplinary team. They may also provide advice, consultation and training to staff working with individuals and groups across a range of agencies and settings (e.g. social work, mental health teams, general practice/primary care). Therefore, it may be helpful to consider the ways in which your research might be used by psychologists in their advisory roles and discuss how this might be achieved.

Developing collaborations with HCPs and clinical professional networks

One of the biggest barriers to engaging with HCPs is a lack of time, on both sides. To overcome this, consider ways in which you can make HCP engagement and implementation easy, timely and relevant through adopting solutions in this article. To foster new collaborations, consider the range of HCPs that could potentially benefit from your research interests and the evidence you have gathered from your research so far. Health Psychology research is often of interest to medical and nursing colleagues, as well as those working in allied health professions -including

physiotherapists and rehabilitation services, occupational therapists, dietician/weight management teams, public health, government.

Once you have identified the type of professional(s) that you could collaborate with, the next step is to consider if you need to engage on a clinical care level, i.e. those who are involved in care delivery, or on a management or commissioning level, i.e. where you want to influence models of care (delivery or guidelines). If your research has wide-ranging interest, you might want to engage with a professional group that looks after the interests of its members, such as an equivalent to the EHPS e.g. Occupational Therapy Europe, or you could focus on a specific health condition (e.g. the European Hypertension Society etc.).

Before making contact, do some research to identify shared interests: what research do they already do? What are their research ambitions? Some University-Hospital organisations may have a clear research strategy and website of current projects, such as the one I work in: <https://www.leicestersresearch.nhs.uk/>. You should also identify the current clinical and health priorities, both locally and nationally, as this will help you to reflect on your shared ambition and your mutual values for collaboration. As a researcher, you can provide expertise in terms of high quality evidence-based approaches for optimising their patient care.

One of the fundamental factors in forming collaborations with HCPs is to demonstrate genuine interest in understanding the realities of clinical practice at this moment and communicating a desire to support them with the best available health psych evidence. This might be achieved through shadowing clinics or key meetings, honorary roles within health organisations, or offering teaching or collaborative research. Most of us had little practical experience during our health psychology training; one way we can gain valuable insight into the way care is delivered and the overall patient experience is to explore the

possibility of arranging opportunities for shadowing clinics or placements through honorary contracts or volunteering. You may be able to design an Embedded Researcher (ER) role to implement a collaborative joint university-health care owned research agenda to facilitate collaborative working between researchers and end-user stakeholders (i.e. HCPs and patients). ER allows researchers to experience the 'worldview' of the health care system, its members and their partners, but also requires the researcher to assess their experience in light of academic knowledge (see Cheetham et al., 2018).

Using language that connects and resonates with health care professionals is key to engaging with HCPs, so consider using the wording and key terms used in relevant national strategies (particularly the terms used in clinical targets) and policies, as well as clinical guidelines.

In summary, this reflective article highlights strategies for developing collaborations with health care professionals to implement research into practice. These include engaging with practitioner psychologists working in health, clinical, forensic or counselling psychology, as well as identifying key health care professionals and the health care setting most relevant to your research. The article also highlights the importance of working with health care professionals to co-create research that is informed by health care practice experience to maximise the opportunities of implementing health psychology evidence into practice.

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