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How to use SUPPORT Tools presented by Dr. John Lavis, Director of the McMaster Health Forum

featuring a story of implementation from Evidence-Informed Policy Networks (EVIPNet)

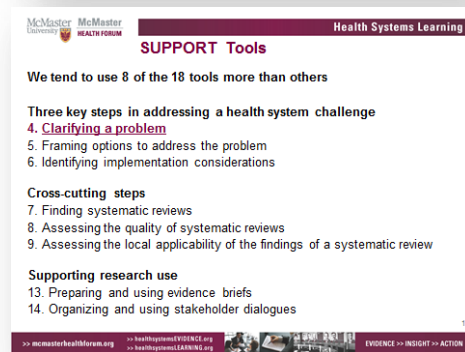
Introduction

Welcome to this installment in the Spotlight on KT Methods and Tools series, presented by CHNET-Works! and the NCCMT. Today's advisor on tap is Dr. John Lavis. In addition to several other roles, Dr. Lavis is the Director of the McMaster Health Forum, and he led the creation of Health Systems Evidence, a website that offers comprehensive, free access to high quality evidence on strengthening health systems and getting cost-effective programs, services, and drugs to those who need them.

Today's topic will be one of the tools from the **SUP**porting **POL**icy relevant **Re**views and **T**rials (SUPPORT) project. Eighteen SUPPORT Tools were developed as a set of practical tools to help improve the quality and efficiency of decision making in healthcare, public health, and health systems in general. Dr. Lavis noted that eight of the SUPPORT Tools are used far more often than the others. The one that addresses what is widely considered the most challenging topic – *SUPPORT Tool #4: Clarifying a problem* – will be the subject of this webinar.

Why is important to clarify your problem?

Though this process may seem 'easy' at first, its importance cannot be overstated. In Dr. Lavis's words, "If we get the problem wrong, we are – by definition – going to get the solutions to the problem wrong." It is crucial for decision makers to go through the process of brainstorming about the potential causes of the



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problem and then looking for data and evidence to identify which causes are most important to address.

Using SUPPORT Tool #4

In order to clarify the problem, SUPPORT Tool #4 asks five questions:

- 1) What is the problem (and its causes)?
- 2) How did the problem come to attention and has this process influenced the prospect of it being addressed?
- 3) What indicators can be used, or collected, to establish the magnitude of the problem and to measure progress in addressing it?
- 4) What comparisons can be made to establish the magnitude of the problem and the measure progress in addressing it?
- 5) How can a problem be framed (or described) in a way that will motivate different groups?

1) What is the problem?


This brainstorming step invites us to break the problem down into one or more of four categories: a risk factor, disease, or condition; a program, service, or drug; current health system arrangements; and current degree of implementation of a course of action.

For example, if the problem relates to limited progress in the fight against malaria, we can say the problem is the high and rising rate of malaria in developing countries (risk factor/disease/condition). One potential cause is the high rate of use of a drug that is no longer recommended (program/service/drug). Another potential cause is that the recommended therapy is more expensive and less affordable (health system arrangement). Moreover, some providers may not be following national treatment guidelines (degree of implementation).

2) How did the problem come to attention?

Problems come to light through several mechanisms, such as a focusing event (e.g. a news-worthy incident), a change in an indicator (e.g. research on disease prevalence shows a disturbing trend), or feedback from operation of a policy/program (e.g. evaluation reports identifying challenges).

A problem can be defined as warranting action through a comparison with a more ideal state of affairs (e.g. crime rate is intolerably high), a comparison with other jurisdictions (e.g. lower




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Why Problem Clarification Matters

- Policymakers and other decision-makers often find themselves in a situation that spurs them to work out how best to define a problem
 - e.g., being asked a tough question in the legislature
 - e.g., finding a problem highlighted on the front page of their morning newspaper
- Policymakers' and other decision-makers' motivations for defining a problem can also be quite diverse
 - e.g., struggling with whether to pay serious attention to a problem that others assert is important
 - e.g., wondering how to convince others to agree a problem is important

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Questions to Consider

1. What is the problem (and its causes)?
2. How did the problem come to attention and has this process influenced the prospect of it being addressed?
3. What indicators can be used, or collected, to establish the magnitude of the problem and to measure progress in addressing it?
4. What comparisons can be made to establish the magnitude of the problem and to measure progress in addressing it?
5. How can a problem be framed (or described) in a way that will motivate different groups?

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Q1: What is the Problem (and its Causes)?

- Describe the problem in terms of whether it relates to one or more of
 - A risk factor, disease or condition
 - A program, service or drug currently being used
 - Current health system arrangements within which programs, services and drugs are provided
 - Governance arrangements
 - Financial arrangements
 - Delivery arrangements
 - Current degree of implementation of an agreed course of action (e.g., a policy)
 - Patients / citizens (e.g., lack of awareness of a free program)
 - Health workers (e.g., lack of adherence to guidelines)
 - Organizations (e.g., lack of performance management of staff)
 - System (e.g., lack of enforcement of regulations)

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Q2: How Did the Problem Come to Attention? (2)

- How did the problem come to attention and has this process influenced the prospect of it being addressed? (2)
 - A problem can be defined as warranting governmental action by
 - Comparing current conditions with values concerning more ideal states of affairs
 - Comparing performance with that of other jurisdictions
 - Putting the subject in one category or another (i.e., framing)

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vaccination rate than neighbouring areas), or putting the subject in one category or another (e.g. lack of physicians could be a problem with supply, distribution, or payment).

3) What indicators can we use to establish the size of the problem?

Establishing the size of the problem depends on the availability of indicators. In this sense, we need to understand what indicators are currently being measured, or should be measured in the future. Alternatively, indicators can relate to a particular goal, such as aiming to be an international leader in immunization coverage. Dr. Lavis stresses that finding high quality data is very helpful for answering questions 2 and 3.

4) What comparisons can we make to establish the magnitude of the problem?

According to Dr. Lavis, making comparisons to illustrate that the problem is getting worse over time, or how one area is performing against a similar jurisdiction, can have a big influence on whether people decide to take action. Comparisons can be within a jurisdiction over time, between jurisdictions, between plans and reality, or between predictions and reality. This is one of the two questions where research evidence should be relied upon.

5) How can the problem be framed to motivate groups?

Unsurprisingly, how a problem is framed can make a significant difference in motivating different groups. If we were to try to motivate groups to improve immunization rates, the problem could be framed in relation to the re-emergence of measles, which may resonate with parents and physicians. It could also be framed in terms of lack of awareness of immunization schedules, to motivate organizations who support parents. Or it could be framed as a drop in program coverage rates, which would motivate public health professionals. This is the second question that is greatly aided by research evidence.

The role of research evidence

Finding high quality research evidence can save considerable time in answering several questions posed by this SUPPORT Tool. Data on indicators from epidemiologists can provide answers to questions 2 and 3. Administrative database studies and community surveys can making comparisons to answer Question 4. Qualitative studies that address how different groups attach meaning to a problem can help to answer question 5.

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Q3: What Indicators?

- What indicators can be used, or collected, to establish the magnitude of the problem and to measure progress in addressing it?
 - What indicators are currently being measured (or can and should be measured) accurately?
 - Immunization coverage rate by age group
 - What purpose (as expressed through indicators) could be achieved?
 - To be a leader in immunization coverage

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Q4: What Comparators? (2)

- What comparisons can be made to establish the magnitude of the problem and to measure progress in addressing it? (2)
 - This is one of two questions that can be answered by research evidence
 - The research evidence can include research findings from administrative database studies or community surveys that make comparisons across countries (or provinces / states, districts) or organizations
 - e.g., an independent study of administrative data related to immunizations from 100 primary care practices

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Q5: What Framing Resonates? (2)

- How can a problem be framed (or described) in a way that will motivate different groups? (2)
 - This is the second of two questions that can be answered by research evidence
 - The research evidence can include research findings from qualitative studies (e.g., case studies, interviews, focus groups) that address the meanings that individuals or groups attach to the problem, indicators and comparisons
 - e.g., a case study of four primary care practices' experiences with a declining immunization coverage rate that draws on interviews with practice managers, physicians, nurses and administrative staff

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Research Evidence Can Help to Respond to Two Key Questions

- What comparisons can be made to establish the magnitude of the problem and to measure progress in addressing it? (question 4)
 - Research findings from administrative database studies or community surveys that make comparisons across countries (or provinces / states, districts) or organizations
- How can a problem be framed (or described) in a way that will motivate different groups? (question 5)
 - Research findings from qualitative studies that address the meanings that individuals or groups attach to the problem, indicators and comparisons

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Finding research evidence

Dr. Lavis has several recommendations for the best places to find research evidence to make it easier to clarify a problem. To find administrative database studies and community surveys to make comparisons, the best place to search is with “hedges” on PubMed.org. Hedges are validated search strategies. These are most appropriate if the problem is clinical in nature or related to public health services.

Conversely, if the problem involves how we organize ourselves to deliver programs, services and drugs to people, Health Systems Evidence contains all available systematic reviews that address these two questions.

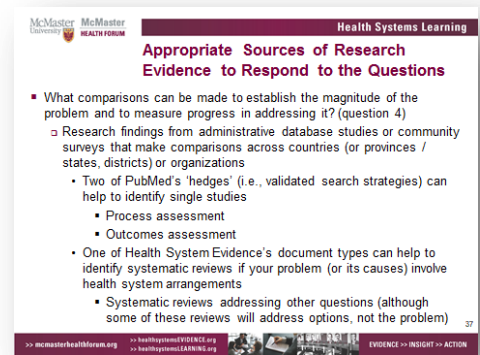
Additional resources available

As of this writing, McMaster Health Forum is in the process of launching an online course. Content of the course will focus on the eight most commonly used SUPPORT Tools, key steps in addressing a health system challenge (and skills that are common to each of the key steps), and steps to support research use within organizations. Currently, funding has been procured to offer the course free of charge to staff of the Ontario Ministry of Health & Long-Term Care, though a small fee applies to other users.

User story from EVIPNet

In 2008, Dr. Ulysses Panisset leads the WHO-sponsored Evidence-Informed Policy Networks (EVIPNet), and he recently convened a joint capacity-building workshop with policy makers and researchers from seven sub-Saharan African countries. During the workshop, the group used five different SUPPORT Tools to help produce an evidence brief, develop ideas for organizing a policy dialogue, and plan an evaluation of the briefs and dialogues.

After having used SUPPORT Tools throughout the workshop, the group successfully secured funding to evaluate impacts of the resulting briefs and dialogues. In the opinion of Dr. Panisset, this speaks to the impact that correctly clarifying the problem can have.



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Appropriate Sources of Research Evidence to Respond to the Questions

- What comparisons can be made to establish the magnitude of the problem and to measure progress in addressing it? (question 4)
 - Research findings from administrative database studies or community surveys that make comparisons across countries (or provinces / states, districts) or organizations
 - Two of PubMed's 'hedges' (i.e., validated search strategies) can help to identify single studies
 - Process assessment
 - Outcomes assessment
 - One of Health System Evidence's document types can help to identify systematic reviews if your problem (or its causes) involve health system arrangements
 - Systematic reviews addressing other questions (although some of these reviews will address options, not the problem)

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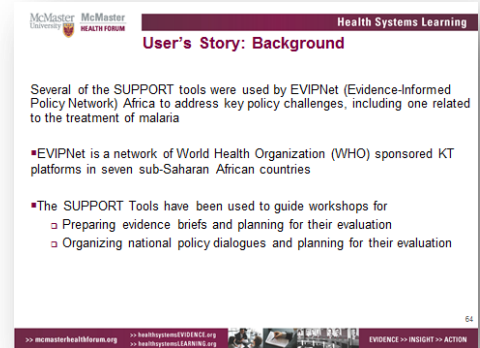
We'll Soon Be Launching a Course (2)

The course, which can be accessed through the McMaster Health Forum website once it's live, will be the first of several based on the SUPPORT tools

The course can be tailored to a learning goal

- To learn about how to find and use research evidence efficiently
 - Focus on key modules, tasks and resources (included in units 1, 2, 3, 4 and 8)
- To work efficiently when finding and using research evidence
 - Benefit from the full range of videos, tasks and resources (units 1-8)
- To master activities focused on finding and using research evidence
 - Master through supplementary modules, tasks and resources (supplementary units focused on preparing evidence briefs or leading 'intervention' projects – available upon request, either as supported online learning opportunities or supported face-to-face-learning opportunities)

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User's Story: Background

Several of the SUPPORT tools were used by EVIPNet (Evidence-Informed Policy Network) Africa to address key policy challenges, including one related to the treatment of malaria

- EVIPNet is a network of World Health Organization (WHO) sponsored KT platforms in seven sub-Saharan African countries
- The SUPPORT Tools have been used to guide workshops for
 - Preparing evidence briefs and planning for their evaluation
 - Organizing national policy dialogues and planning for their evaluation

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Summary

Though at first it may seem like an easy task, clarifying a problem is an involved and challenging process that has a powerful impact on the success of eventual solutions. Fortunately, a SUPPORT Tool exists to help with this process. *SUPPORT Tool #4: Clarifying a problem* ensures that you find answers to five specific questions. This involves brainstorming a problem and its potential causes (for question 1), and conducting a targeted search for relevant data (for questions 2 and 3) and research evidence (for questions 4 and 5). Using PubMed hedges for single studies and Health Systems Evidence for reviews on health systems arrangements will save a great deal of time throughout this process. Remember, the better defined your problem is, the more effective your actions will be.

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Summing Up

- Problem clarification involves
 - Brainstorming about a problem and its potential causes (question 1)
 - Q1 - What is the problem (and its causes)?
 - Search for relevant data (questions 2 and 3) and research evidence (questions 4 and 5) in appropriate sources (PubMed for single studies or Health Systems Evidence for systematic reviews related to health system arrangements)
 - Q2 - How did the problem come to attention and has this process influenced the prospect of it being addressed?
 - Q3 - What indicators can be used, or collected, to establish the magnitude of the problem and to measure progress in addressing it?
 - Q4 - What comparisons can be made to establish the magnitude of the problem and to measure progress in addressing it?
 - Q5 - How can a problem be framed (or described) in a way that will motivate different groups?
 - Iteratively clarifying the problem (and its causes) in light of the data and research evidence found

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