

Implementation Research for Oral Health

Dear Readers,

Throughout the past 30 years or so, oral health science has contributed substantially to our understanding of how to avoid the major oral diseases and conditions. Broadly speaking, we know how to prevent conditions like dental caries, periodontal disease, tooth loss and oral cavity cancer. Considerable health gains may be achieved through population-directed actions, work by oral health professionals and the engagement of the individual.

Meanwhile, despite the advances in knowledge about disease prevention and health promotion, we continue to have major challenges in the implementation of recognised methods in the 'real world'. Implementation issues arise as a result of a range of factors, including real-world contextual factors that are either overlooked or not captured by research disciplines. Implementation research shines a light on those factors, providing the basis for the kind of context-specific and evidence-informed decision-making that is crucial to translating what is theoretically possible into reality in practice.

Implementation research is a growing field of study with roots in many disciplines and research traditions. It addresses a wide range of implementation problems in diverse contexts. The term implementation research describes the scientific study of the processes used in the application of health initiatives as well as the contextual factors that affect these processes. One major purpose of implementation research is to support and promote the successful and sustainable application of interventions that have been demonstrated to be effective. Within oral health, some lessons have been learned in terms of the importance of sociocultural contexts for implementation of automatic fluoridation through vehicles like water, salt or milk, use of diagnostic tests that identify oral cancer, tobacco prevention programmes or oral health promotion through schools.

Implementation research can be used to figure out how to distribute human resources so that geo-

graphically remote communities can access care when needed, and how to eliminate financial barriers that prevent vulnerable populations from getting needed services. It is also about reducing costs and making organisations more efficient and accountable. Finally, implementation research is about learning how to bring promising strategies to scale, and importantly, how to sustain these strategies over the long term.

Implementation research for health is a type of health policy and systems research concerned with the study of clinical and public health policies, programmes and practices, with the basic intent being to understand not only what is and isn't working, but also how and why implementation is succeeding or failing, as well as to test approaches to improve implementation.

Implementation outcome variables serve as indicators of how well a given implementation is actually working. The implementation outcome variables include information about acceptability of interventions, adoption, appropriateness, feasibility, fidelity, implementation cost, coverage and sustainability. The variables can also be seen as intermediate factors that contribute to other important outcomes such as satisfaction with health care or sustainable improvement of health status.

The implementation gap is largely overlooked in oral health research. The current situation calls for strengthening of operational research with better focus on processes and application of research concerning community-oriented disease prevention and health promotion. Such scientific reports on public health research are given priority by the journal *Oral Health and Preventive Dentistry*.

Sincerely yours,



Prof. P.E. Petersen