

Nepal Urgently Needs a National Evidence Synthesis Centre

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Evidence synthesis is a powerful research process that allows researchers to combine and analyse all relevant data from multiple studies and draw conclusions based on the most up-to-date evidence available. The science to synthesize research evidence has developed considerably in recent years.

Evidence-based health care has undergone a revolution over two decades. Several global organizations produce, support and use evidence synthesis, including: the Cochrane Collaboration, the Campbell Collaboration, the Health Evidence Network WHO, Evidence Synthesis International, and several others have been preparing high quality summaries of research about the effectiveness of drugs, interventions and health care in general.¹ Many policymakers, clinicians and health managers are drawing on these reliable reviews in their decision making. There is increasing trend of scientific publications on health research in Nepal, therefore this is the right time to assess the quality of published articles and evidence synthesis for evidence-informed decision-making.

The culture of evidence synthesis is still very limited. The National Health Policy of Nepal 2019 also aims to promote evidence-informed policy formulation to improve the health of Nepalese people. To date this notion of using independent evidence generated in systematic reviews of effectiveness has not yet reached many policymakers, civil servants and health managers in Nepal.² One of the mandates of Nepal Health Research Council (NHRC) is promoting the use of evidence in evidence-informed decision-making in Nepal. Though a 'Knowledge Café' secretariat has been established at NHRC, there is no regular communication between key stakeholders. One of the key barriers is a lack of trained human resources for evidence synthesis and skills for identifying current evidence gaps for further interventions. Furthermore, it has been identified

that communication gaps exist between researchers and policymakers which impede the utilization of research-based information and recommendations in decision-making process in Nepal. To facilitate such communication requires the establishment of a unit responsible for synthesizing evidence and producing actionable messages for evidence-informed decision-making.³

Policymakers and health system managers routinely face difficult decisions around allocating resources to improve people's health through better health services and to promote equity. Providing access to reliable evidence for health workers and policy makers in Nepal is potentially the single most cost effective and achievable strategy for sustainable improvement in health care.

There are a number of challenges to accessing and assessing scientific knowledge and synthesizing its findings. Evidence syntheses can take a long time, they are labour-intensive and often quite expensive.⁴ Moreover, often systematic reviews are conducted and written up by researchers in high-income countries. But when the review addresses a topic pertinent to low- and middle-income settings, this tends to leave out the insiders' perspective on the choice of study questions and on the feasibility of implementing different options. Not including local views and perspectives from these countries negotiates the principle of 'best evidence synthesis',⁵ as critical evidence from Nepal, which would help local decision-making might not be included in reviews conducted by researchers in high-income countries with a global question in mind. If this is the case the 'best evidence synthesis' has not worked for decision-making in Nepal.

Therefore, we argue that there is a need for a National Evidence Synthesis Centre under NHRC which can

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synthesize the global, national and local research evidence in a way that is relevant to a local context and meets demand of programme managers and policymakers at national and sub-national levels in Nepal. At the same time such Centre will promote the use of systematic review findings to appropriate decision-makers to ensure they have the best chance of getting implemented.

The NHRC may collaborate with national and international academic institutions to establish a National Evidence Synthesis Centre which will support the Government of Nepal by advocating for evidence in all policies and health for all. Regular evidence synthesis can also contribute to the tracking of progress of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) indicators. This national centre will work in close collaboration with national and international academics and research institutions, Federal, Provincial and Local Governments, health experts and health care providers. The main aims of the Centre are to:

- increase research capacity among health professionals/health researchers to conduct evidence synthesis and research communication at local and national level;
- increase capacity among health professionals, health managers and policymakers to interpret existing evidence synthesis;
- provide research-based information about the effects of health and social care interventions by reviewing the local evidence systematically;
- increase the use of evidence in health care derived from reviews of evaluations of the effects of interventions and the accuracy of diagnostic tests; and
- disseminate the results of reviews of interventions in health care and evaluate their usefulness to clinicians, managers, policy makers and people with health care needs.

This can be useful to identify gaps in knowledge, establish an evidence base for best-practice guidance, or help inform policymakers and practitioners. There are many types of outputs that use evidence synthesis, such as policy briefs, systematic reviews, clinical practice guidelines and so on. Finally, establishing a National

Evidence Synthesis Centre would be very timely to help develop mechanisms of evidence synthesis as well as improve research communication. The first step should be the planning of a national workshop to identifying evidence gaps, next independent research teams can be formed for evidence synthesis while experts from institutions in the global north can provide mentoring support for capacity building and help ensure the centre's sustainability.

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