Understanding Implementation Research: Case study from the HIFA virtual discussion forum

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Background:
Healthcare information for All (HIFA) is a global initiative of more than 17,000 individuals in 175 countries. Under a new program called ‘Evidence-Informed Policy and Practice’, themed discussions are being conducted in the HIFA virtual forum. The results of the second themed discussion on “Implementation Research(IR) - engaging everyone, not just scientists” held in 2016 for a period of six weeks is being presented.

Methodology:
The HIFA moderator introduced the topic in the first week. Every week a set of question was sent to the forum for discussion. A thematic analysis was conducted on the 100 substantial contributions received.

Results:

Theme 1: There is confusion about IR, particularly in relation to similar approaches like quality improvement, operational research, knowledge translation and health-services research.

“Like the proverbial 7 blind men attempting to describe an elephant, a universal definition of IR appears elusive!”
- Global Health Professional, Switzerland

“I may not have heard of implementation research but think implementation research should similar to operational research.”
- Global Health Professional, Afghanistan

“I consider a full understanding of IR as a necessary prerequisite for successful implementation of research outcomes, and for people like me already in QI, the understanding of the shared boundaries and differences further consolidate on that.”
- Medical Doctor, Nigeria

“My question: is there a difference, similarity between IR and TR (Translational Research)?” – Academic, Nigeria

“I have been puzzling over what the difference is between IR and Participatory Action Research(PAR) or Participatory Action Learning(PAL).” - Academic, UK

Theme 2: IR provides an opportunity to better understand the health system and policy perspective.

“IR is demand driven and research questions are framed based on needs identified together with relevant stakeholders / implementers in the health system (or policy makers).” - Global Health Professional, Pakistan

Theme 3: Difficulty in locating implementation research articles for policy making, program planning and research is a challenge.

“There are thousands of papers 'out there' that could be described as 'Implementation Research', and yet may not be easy to identify as such.”- Global Health Professional, UK

“PubMed does not have 'implementation research' in its phrase index...I see nothing adds sensitivity and specificity to a search on this topic, and (there is) no consistency...”- Medical Librarian, USA

Conclusion and Considerations:
1. The proliferation of multiple terminologies based on epistemological and ontological variations are confusing for not only frontline health workers but also for those in the academia. This confusion may be limiting academic, political and financial commitment to IR and needs to be addressed as a priority.
2. Global health workers have a positive outlook about IR and there is a demand to learn and understand about IR. It is seen as an essential step towards implementation of research evidence in the real world.
3. Locating IR resources and articles is a major challenge on account of major indexing databases like PubMed not having indexing terms for it. This is compounded by the proliferation of multiple terminologies. Indexing agencies should consider retrospective indexing of IR to facilitate easy retrieval of IR articles and resources.

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