Swimming with crocodiles: lessons learned from 40 years of trying to influence policy

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The importance of drug policy

- Drugs have destroyed many people, but wrong policies have destroyed many more

  Kofi Annan UN Secretary General

Research and knowledge transfer

- Many recognise importance of knowledge transfer, but it remains a challenge

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  (Not a new challenge)

  Lomas 1997

  Decision makers in the British merchant navy took 263 years to introduce citrus juice as a routine preventive for scurvy following Lancaster's first demonstration of its value in 1601

  Miller and Hester 1986

- Last 40 years - burgeoning research output

- How do we ensure evidence translation and adoption into policy?

The challenge of evidence-based policy

- In general there is a history of disappointment at how research has influenced policy

"There has been disappointment at the lack of progress in promoting evidence-based policy & management compared with the relative success of evidence-based medicine … the consumers of policy & management research have not found the outputs sufficiently relevant & useful, & researchers have become frustrated by the lack of uptake of the results of such systematic reviews by policy makers & managers." Sheldon 2005

"… many researchers are politically naïve. They have a poor understanding of how policy is made & have unrealistic expectations about what research can achieve." Black 2001

The particular challenges in the AOD field

- A domain
  - With significant contentions, morals and strong beliefs
  - That doesn't always sing from same songsheet
  - That sometimes seems to involve more internal dissent than cohesive external advocacy

The role and risks for researchers advocating for policy

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- Policy and evidence do not always coincide:
  - There is almost an inverse relationship with evidence and what the community and governments will support
  - Beliefs about drug use appear to have more impact than evidence ("it's a minority of consumers who are different - "bad" "self-inflicted" "moral weakness" "abuser" "addict" "sick")

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- Policy decisions are made in ignorance (deliberate or otherwise) of the evidence
  - E.g. deregulation of alcohol supply in many countries which results in increased supply

"You know those teeny tiny little birds that walk around so trustingly inside a crocodile's mouth? Well, I just been eatin' those little guys like popcorn."

The role and risks for researchers advocating for policy

- Uncertainty of where to start

Contention about the role of researchers

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- Some (e.g. Doll) argue there is a critical role for researchers to engage in advocacy

- Others argue that:

  - Researchers can help create a context for evidence-based practice, or engage in advocacy, but they are not always the most appropriate to engage in such strategies and the risks are great

  - Research and policy are like oil and water - research is about evidence, fidelity and logical argument while politics is about the next election, perceptions, bargains and timing

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The distinct challenges of policy influence

- Prevention and treatment practitioners might seek out evidence, policy makers are less likely to (Lenton 2004)
- They may be more responsive to that which is consistent with their position, but ignore or even trivialise/demonise evidence or arguement which is inconsistent with this
- Competing with evidence are:
  - Personal (or close) experience
  - Beliefs/conceptualisations of AOD use
  - Party politics
  - Political opportunity
  - 'Deals' and promises
  - Policy history
  - Timing

The question of - what is evidence?

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- We must beware of assumptions about the nature and role of science and evidence (Ritter et al 2018)

- Science provides us with contestable hypotheses not with "proof" or "fact"

- There are diverse accounts/understanding of evidence – evidence is not irrefutable certainty – it is contestable and it does not emerge and is not used in a vacuum – it is directly influenced by beliefs of individuals, communities and coalitions

- And these coalitions have diverse degrees of influence or dominance, which in themselves are dynamic

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- and in the drug field we should be aware they can validate or invalidate evidence (to themselves and others) with a simple anecdote

The distinct challenges of policy influence

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- And then of course systems can be moribund
  - Altering one part of the system puts pressure on others and bureaucracies resist change

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- Do we need to develop our own anecdotes? (for example, Ralph Hingson and work on drink driving)

- Do we need to mind our language?
  - Some of our language supports bimodal distribution of alcohol problems and marginalisation of AOD consumers
  - Some of our language supports stigma and discrimination

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  - Some of our language supports bimodal distribution of alcohol problems and marginalisation of AOD consumers
  - Some of our language supports stigma and discrimination
  - Choice of words, not so much logic or evidence, influenced support for changes to cannabis legislation in WA Drug Summit
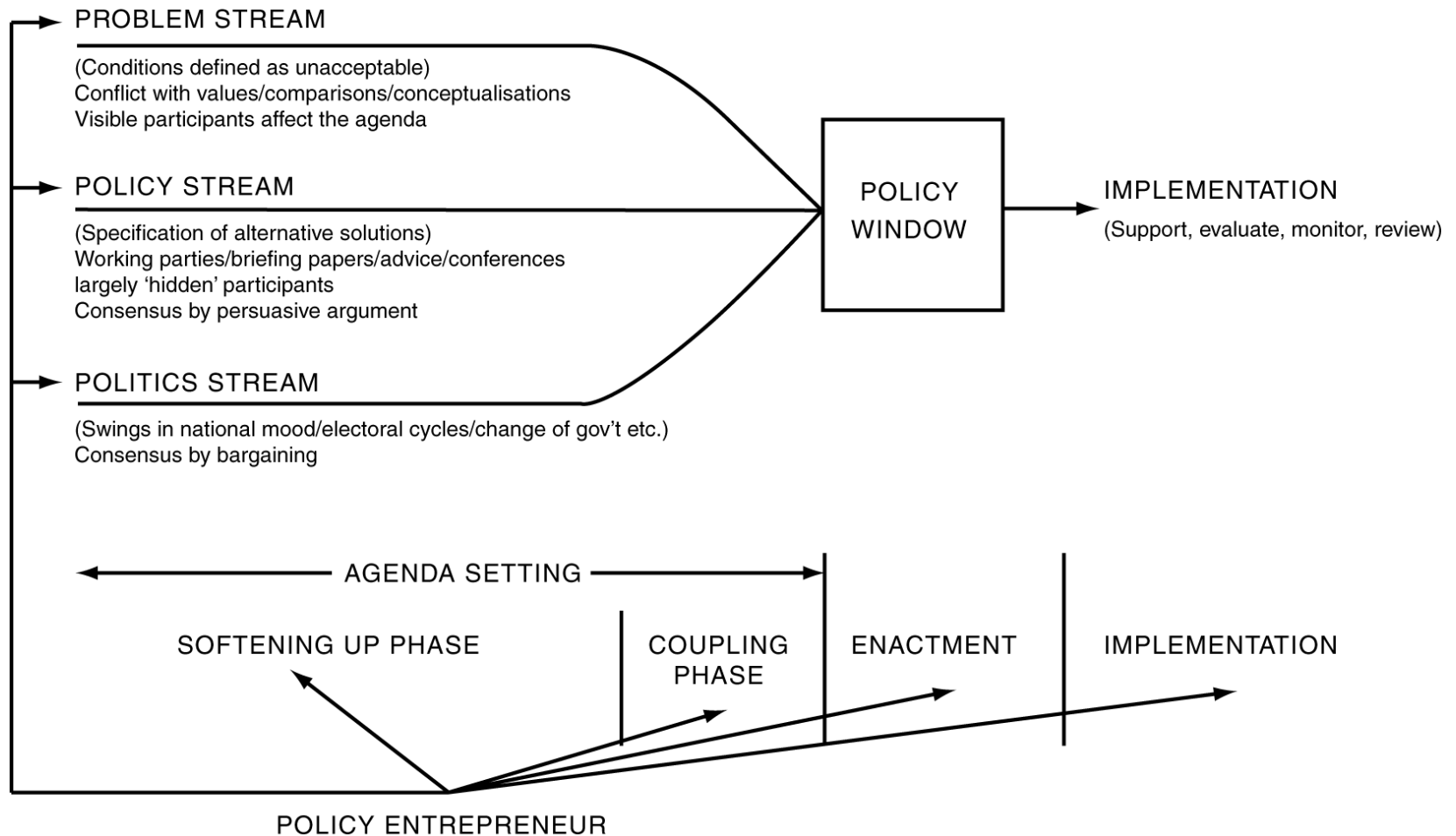
Influencing policy

- There is a discipline, art, or science of policy change, and those of us who wish to directly influence policy should familiarise ourselves with models, strategies and/or skills or align ourselves with those with relevant expertise

There are various models of policy influence and change

- For example
  - Advocacy Coalition Framework
  - Punctuated Equilibrium
  - Kingdon's Multiple Streams

Kingdon's model of policy change

What creates policy windows?

- Joining of problems, policy alternatives and politics
- Participants or players may be hidden or visible agenda influencers
- A (worrying) event or series of events or problems, that concern a community (or influential individual) and that a government perceives it must address, is more likely to be placed on the agenda:

> "Policy entrepreneurs invest considerable resources bringing their conception of problems to officials' attention, and trying to convince them to see problems their way." Kingdon 1995

What creates policy windows?

- Policies that survive the messy processes (sometimes called a primeval soup) are:
  - Possible (technically feasible)
  - Congruent with community and key player values and acceptable
  - Politically attractive
  - Feasible within budgetary and other (practical) constraints

What creates policy windows?

- ## The importance of timing and bargaining:

  Policy entrepreneurs "… lie in wait - for a window to open … [then] they are ready to paddle and their readiness, combined with their sense of riding the wave and using forces beyond their control contributes to success". Kingdon 1995

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  Others also highlight the role of beliefs that exist or accrue or are reinforced among coalitions

  (concerned parents; members of the community, police; politicians; industrial/community leaders)

Importance of community perceptions

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  - e.g. models of drug use/dependence
  - Marginalisation vs inclusive approach with consumers
- May tolerate impersonal distal outcomes of drug use, but less willing to tolerate more immediate outcomes that have personal relevance
- If we wish to engage communities:
  - Challenge prevailing views
  - How change/effective responses have personal relevance
  - It is possible to act and things will improve

What are the lessons for researchers?

- Accumulate evidence and identify how to make it relevant
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- Look for emerging windows of opportunity that occur in the problem and political spheres

- Better understand the policy process and create partnerships and understand the role of coalitions and entrepreneurs

- Be prepared

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- Be prepared – unlike me

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    - Engage in a process that may demand confidentiality vs public debate
    - Need for quick response vs need for careful consideration and peer review

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- Maintain scientific position vs pragmatism/bargaining

- Risks
  - Lose perceived objectivity
  - Attacked by opposing interest groups
  - Lose funding
  - Find it hard to argue (one anecdote disproves good science)

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Cannabis
A case example

Cannabis
A case example

- Lenton et al. developed a review of legislative options for Victoria

- Members of WA state branch of Australian Labor Party favored cannabis law reform

- Drug Summit created
  - One small group focused on law reform
  - Commitment to reform cannabis legislation carried by Summit

Cannabis
A case example

- Govt. established Working Group on Drug Law Reform to develop implementation
  - Lawyer, police, researcher, GP, government representatives from Justice and Drug and Alcohol Office
- The subsequent changes maintained cannabis possession and cultivation as illegal, but allowed discretion of police to issue an infringement notice with aim to encourage treatment engagement and remove barriers to treatment

Role of bureaucrat and researcher

- Represent govt. (while I was out of town) & manage government contribution in context of diverse interest groups of police, medicine, law, research

- Evidence vs pragmatism and politics

Role of bureaucrat and researcher

- Manage external pressure of interest groups and act as government media spokesperson

- My position became political

Role of bureaucrat and researcher

- Brief politicians:

- Evidence vs pragmatism
- Evidence vs politics
- Evidence vs prejudice

- Directly advise Minister and Parliamentary Secretary

- Perceived political alignment

Legislation was enacted
What influenced this?

- Window of opportunity
- Quality research provided from a reliable and trusted source, who understood policy development
- Personal relationships
- Persistence
- Public support
- What influenced debate?
  - Summit:
    - Language critical
    - Personal relevance
    - Credibility of sources of information

What were the barriers and/or risks?

- Personal models of drug use:
  - Prejudice: punishment not treatment
- Media bias coupled with anecdote which was given equal or more weight than evidence - evidential vacuums filled with anecdote and opinion
- Party politics – a wedge; tough vs soft on crime
- Political expedience not evidence or logic or even belief

What were the barriers and/or risks?

- Evidence can be countered with anecdote, and evidential vacuum was particularly risky
  - "Cannabis is 30 times stronger and so causes MH problems"
  - Contradicting anecdote invited vilification

- Political opportunity and pragmatism
  - Fueled community misinformation –it's legal
  - Reduced opportunity for meaningful evaluation – politically risky
  - Reduced opportunity to educate community (law and harm) and enhance treatment access, especially for young people

- Researchers cast as political manipulators

What are the general lessons?

- ## Can we
  - learn to operate from same songsheet and present a more cohesive view (e.g. alcopops tax)
  - address funding models that create competition, short term employment, stifle cohesion and development
  - create a long term strategic vision
  - avoid debates that tackle the individual and not the issue
  - create closer alignment between peaks, service providers and researchers

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- ## Address stigma and discrimination as a priority

Conclusions

- Researchers have an important role in policy development

- There are distinct skills and risks

- Requires ability to:
  - Develop evidence
  - Identify relevance for community and policy
  - Understand process and create partnerships
  - Understand and manage risks
  - Look for opportunities and be prepared
  - Persist

Conclusions

- If we wish to better influence policy we need to better understand what coalitions exist and/or how we can influence

- To influence and join with coalitions to provide meaningful solutions and to recognise that
    - Evidence is not just isolated fact and policies and interpretation of evidence are influenced by beliefs

- Borrowing from Ritter and colleagues – we need to:
    - Identify and support policy entrepreneurs/policy brokers
    - Challenge models that create a context antagonistic to evidence
    - Help create and be alert to windows of opportunity ready with solutions and,
    - Persevere

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