Health Research and Lay Involvement

The idea of utilising lay knowledge or expertise in the governments’ current policy context is now relatively established. The reason behind this incentive stems from the need for policies to be seen as more legitimate and safeguarding the public interest. Alongside this trend is the parallel merger of the lay publics voice in all health-related research, the assumption that academics and expert health professionals know best is not only losing popularity but is increasingly being questioned. Health research has to be seen as more quality driven and salient to user needs which means using and understanding their perspectives and opinions. Despite the growing desire to promote patient and carer participation in research, involving the lay public in research agendas is not always straightforward. Eliciting the support of the public has to be more than tokenism and represent a genuine desire by researchers to include lay views and interests in the design and execution of research projects. Underpinning any research initiative is the underlying issue of sharing power with the public which may not always sit so easy with some health professionals and researchers. Finding suitable users and carers is not without difficulty, even considering what is meant by the term ‘lay’ in itself can be a dilemma, as ‘lay’ is often applied loosely and it is not easily defined (Hogg & Williamson 2001). Fundamentally while the lay public may wish to be informed about the provision of services it is not always certain if they are as keen in being involved in research or in health-related decision making (Calnan 2004). The practicalities of finding suitable lay input is undeniably variable with worries about some individuals having strong vested interests that may lead them to act in partial ways (Entwistle et al 1998). While the lay publics’ naiveté is presumably useful to researchers at the same time there is a need to find people who are able to argue for the interest and value of others, which implies more than being an amateur. It is also notoriously difficult to recruit people from groups that are hard to reach, those who are socially disadvantaged or representatives of ethnic minorities and it is dubious as to whether others can legitimately be the spokesperson for them. These are new times in politics and society and the climate no longer exists where science can dominate reality.
Researches have to be mindful of the issues and work in ways that can resolve these challenges, as the rewards of a fruitful partnership not only speak for themselves but it is essential if the identified gap between researchers and the public is to be bridged.

References


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