

Editorial

From policy to practice: qualitative research to make a difference in PNG public health

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This special edition of *Contemporary PNG Studies DWU Research Journal* showcases the research completed by our first cohort of Master of Public Health (MPH) graduates from the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences. Four graduates from the two-and-a-half year MPH program, delivered in blended mode, demonstrate how they can apply knowledge and research skills to improve the health and wellbeing of populations in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

These original research articles are based on their MPH dissertations. All articles use variations of qualitative research to first understand, then propose solutions to major problems faced by PNG. Qualitative research is ideal for understanding policy. It also helps us to understand how community members and health professionals experience and make sense of their lives and interactions with the health system.

A common feature of all articles is the use of theory. Quantitative studies can generalize from sample to population from a sound statistical treatment of data, and of course can contribute to theorizing. For qualitative research, however, engagement with theory is inescapable because we can only generalize from theory developed from the data. As a result, each of these articles is characterized by a carefully crafted mixture of theory and method tailored for the research question.

Although policy is widely regarded as an important driver of change, too often there is a gap between the lofty aims of policy and its day-to-day implementation. As a response to malnutrition, especially stunting in children, the Department of National Planning and Monitoring (DNPM) as the lead agency in a collaborative effort with four other departments and development partners developed the National Nutrition Policy (NNP) 2016-2026 and the Nutrition Strategic Action Plan (NSAP) 2018-2022. *Apeng and Schuele* analyze learnings from the implementation of the NSAP 2018-2022. Kurt Lewin's Force Field theory is a well-established approach to understanding change by identifying and analyzing driving and restraining forces in the implementation process. The article recommends how to improve the implementation of the NSAP by strengthening the forces supporting the implementation process and acting to reduce the impact of restraining forces.

Mamats and Schuele in their study of pregnant women accessing antenatal care at St Mary's Antenatal Clinic, Kokopo district of East New Britain Province highlight gender-based power relations that reduce the quality of antenatal services for women. Men, as head of the family, limit women's ability to access economic resources and restrict autonomy in decision making to access antenatal care. Theorizing about cultural explanations of health and illness provides insight in beliefs of spirits and sorcery that influences how women use antenatal care. While women appreciate some of the health workers' approaches, they express dissatisfaction concerning lack of privacy and confidentiality as well as long waiting hours.

Tenanga and Schuele, reporting on respectful maternity care, observe human rights violations during childbirth at the two hospitals in East New Britain Province. Women reported disrespect and maltreatment

during labor by healthcare workers including slapping, verbal abuse, being ignored and scolded. The authors call for immediate actions to end maltreatment and abuse of mothers and promote rights based and women-centered maternal health care.

Adherence to antiretroviral therapy (ART) from the view of healthcare workers is under researched in PNG. *Waiyon and Schuele* bridge this gap by applying street-level bureaucracy theory to explore how frontline healthcare workers at five STI and HIV Clinic in Western Highland Province provide ART services to clients. The authors found a range of interrelated factors including high workload, staff shortage, and inconsistent ART drug supply, pluralistic therapeutic culture, blaming clients and structural issues which foster stigma of vulnerable groups.

As a body of work, these articles are highly relevant to PNG's health policy context. The National Health Plan (NHP) 2011-2020 by the National Department of Health (NDoH) is based on the theme "Back to basics: strengthened primary health care for all and improved service delivery for the rural majority and urban disadvantaged" (Government of Papua New Guinea, 2010). To achieve these goals, there must be re-orientation of the health system in PNG to become more people-centered. Primary Health Care, as articulated in the Alma-Ata Declaration, takes a rights based approach to encourage community participation in health services in order to achieve health equity and social justice (Sheikh, Ranson & Gilson, 2014). The three practice related articles in this collection reveal an urgent need to reorient towards people-centered health systems such as rights, dignity, respect, equity, quality, safety and ethical care (WHO, 2007).

Earlier we noted that, for qualitative researchers, theory is important to ensure generalization of research to different contexts. Theory also explains complexity and predicts what is needed to achieve change. All the articles started with theories whose origins were in the Global North with the flexibility to remain relevant in Lower and Middle Income Countries. These theories were also sufficiently robust to take into account such crucial characteristics of PNG as religion, sorcery, traditional beliefs and gender. Nevertheless, it will be difficult to achieve health equity in PNG without expanding our use of local epistemologies or ways of knowing the world. One of the next frontiers for public health at DWU is to articulate and develop epistemologies and methodologies that reflect Melanesian culture, take into account Colonialism and are grounded in local contexts. Ultimately, this will involve respectful partnerships between researchers and communities. We see the beginnings of this endeavor in these research articles and look forward to future cohorts building on this pioneering work.

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