Background

Recent evidence suggests that the general public are not well-informed about mental illness or mental health research. Feedback from consumer and carer focus groups highlights significant misunderstanding and mistrust about the processes involved in mental health research, e.g., believing that all types of research can be completed within weeks or months, is conducted without ethics committee approval, and usually involves (financial & non-financial) conflicts of interest (Cohen, 2001; Siegel, 2003). Public mistrust in clinical research has been shown to lead to low participation rates in research studies (Salerno, 2008), which has the potential to slow the development of new treatments or prevention strategies for psychiatric disorders. In contrast, mental health researchers typically disseminate information about research outcomes without mention of the broader research context (such as institutional safeguards and timelines). This discrepancy suggests that new, proactive approaches to knowledge dissemination are required to promote a better understanding and more positive attitude to mental health research.

Method

1) A retrospective audit of two recent mental health research projects (1 applied psychological science, 1 neuropsychiatric epidemiology) was conducted to determine key stages of the research process.

2) A literature review was conducted to examine relevant issues concerning the presentation of information in visual displays (e.g., Shah et al. 2005; Kosslyn, 2007). This research indicates that well-designed graphs and charts can convey complex information both clearly and efficiently. Since an important goal is to illustrate the sequence of events involved in each project, a time chart format was selected, based on calendar months, to convey the duration of key elements in the research process. Psychological principles derived from perception and cognition (salience, perceptual organization, information compatibility etc) were employed to promote understanding and memory of the information presented.

3) A simple pictorial display was developed, using Microsoft Office Online Timeline Template (http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/templates/TC010162661033.aspx), to provide a quick and intuitive summary of the processes and timelines involved in each project.

Results

Example 1: Well-being in schizophrenia. Badcock, J.C.*, Paulik, G. & Maybery, M.

Example 2: Intellectual disability & co-occurring psychiatric illness. Morgan V*, Leonard H & Jablensky A

Conclusions

The pictorial display of research timelines:

• provides a simple and effective tool to inform the public about the broader context (eg. ethics application processes, student contributions, source and roles of funding bodies, volunteer participation) of mental health research.

• increases the visibility of current safeguards in the conduct of mental health research, ensuring the public are better informed.

• illustrates the time-frame currently required to undertake different types of mental health research; and highlights a need to examine researchers’ consumer priorities in mental health research.

• is also likely to prompt discussion in the general community and among key stakeholders about the process— as well as the outcomes - of mental health research and so contribute to improved mental health literacy.

Selected References / Acknowledgements


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