CONFERENCE REVIEW

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'Doing Evaluation Better'

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The Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) is a professional organisation for people involved in all aspects of evaluation. The society has an established journal (Evaluation Journal of Australasia) and published ethical guidelines for the conduct of evaluations.¹ The conference is conducted annually to disseminate recent research findings, promote advances in theory and practice and provide a forum for networking. The 2007 AES International Conference was held from 3rd to the 7th September at The Sebel, Albert Park in Melbourne.

The first two days consisted of facilitated workshops with the main conference program being held over the remaining three days. A total of 358 delegates attended including evaluation practitioners, managers, teachers and students from all levels of government, educational institutions, research agencies, community organisations and businesses. The conference was titled 'Doing Evaluation Better' and had five major themes; Valuing, Describing, Attributing, Using and Influencing and Managing.

Several pre-conference workshops by keynote speakers and other specialists were offered to delegates, including:

- Reviewing the evidence: Principles, practice and prospects for realist synthesis
- An indigenous approach to evaluation
- Dealing with the politics of evaluation
- Essentials of survey design and administration
- Logic modelling
- Building evaluation capacity for organisational learning
- Managing evaluation teams
- Principles and methods for inclusive community based evaluation

I attended Professor Pawson's workshop on reviewing the evidence which was based on his book detailing the realist perspective of evidence based policy.² Professor Pawson described the realist synthesis approach and highlighted the benefits and difficulties associated with its use. Rather than being the antithesis to traditional systematic reviews, this approach complements them by providing an avenue for researchers investigating areas that are not amenable to a strict protocol driven methodology such as in the prehospital setting. The

limitations discussed are considerable however a template has been developed that offers guidance.³ Over the past three decades realists have been refining a methodology that cuts through complexity by focusing on the 'theories' that underlie social interventions. The challenge for prehospital researchers wanting to adopt the realist approach to literature synthesis is to evidence its practicality and demonstrate that it offers more than provisional theory and evaluation. Realist synthesis offers an explanatory dimension to intervention critique that has the potential to enrich the knowledge base for paramedic and other health professions.

Each of the three days of the main conference program were opened with a keynote address by some of the leading evaluation theorists and practitioners in the field. Professor Ray Pawson (Research Director of the School of Sociology and Social policy, University of Leeds) reflected on the achievements of evaluation – in particular on the matter of whether it has produced a transferable, durable and cumulative body of knowledge. Professor Hallie Preskill (President of the American Evaluation Society) presented on building evaluation capacity and linking evaluation to organisational learning. On the final day Ms Sue Soal (Community Development Resource Association, South Africa) discussed building evaluation into one's own organisational practice and management.

My interest in community based health program evaluation determined the sessions attended throughout the conference; however I was surprised at the number of paramedic organisational applications that could be found. Performance management of staff, clinical audit processes and reporting, prehospital research issues, education evaluation and management of organisational stakeholders were discussed in various forums. Question times revealed healthy vigorous debate as evaluation is an emerging discipline with a diverse theoretical and methodological background.

The poster presentations were minimal in number, however covered a vast array of topics. Presentation styles varied enormously and evidenced the various authors disciplinary base be it scientific, sociological, management, organisational, educational or political. Set question times provided a platform for networking and research collaboration.

Some of the issues and conclusions to emerge from the conference included the necessity to develop and test program theory to establish a sound evidence base and the need for clearer and stronger conceptual, empirical and analytical tools. Reflective practice, evaluation capacity building and the stakeholder engagement were also promoted. Paramedics involved in evaluation research, management and education would benefit from attendance.

Attendance at this conference was made possible through funding provided by Monash University Department of Community Emergency Health and Paramedic Practice.

The 2008 AES International Conference will be held at the Sheraton Perth Hotel from 8-12 September. More information can be found at the following URL: www.aes2008.com.au

Abstracts have been published in full in the conference handbook which is available at <http://www.aes2007.com.au/>. A number of complete conference papers can also be accessed at this site.

References

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