

What's at stake in stakeholder research? The challenge of knowledge synthesis in making sense of practitioner decision making

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Knowledge Production and Transfer' (Webber et al, submission no. 2099) In the UK, the recent trend of year on year increases in admissions under the Mental Health Act has been linked to a reduction in inpatient beds, plus changes to the nature of community based mental health services. Demand for inpatient beds outstrips supply, while anecdotal evidence from both service users and practitioners suggests that some decisions to compulsorily detain have been made solely in order to secure access to a bed. If this is the case, then it suggests that the contemporary mental health system is not functioning as intended, as well as potentially representing a breach of Article 5 (ECHR). This paper provides an overview of on-going doctoral research concerning decision making by Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHPs). The study utilises both survey and interview methods to specify and make sense of the impact that available resources have on the outcome of Mental Health Act assessments in the UK. Pawson et al (2003) identify the sources of knowledge that high quality social care research should incorporate, closely mirroring generic categories of stakeholders in any given domain of practice. In a study concerning the operation of the Mental Health Act, these include policy makers, managers of health services, bed managers, psychiatrists, AMHPs, and service users and carers. How can the variable views and perspectives of this diverse array of individuals and groups be synthesised in ways which produce meaningful and reliable findings? This paper will explore the practical and ethical implications of knowledge synthesis, and whether in the mental health context we should privilege some sources of knowledge ahead of others. In doing so it will contribute to the conference theme of increasing public accountability by producing a transparent and honest account of the challenges individual researchers face in navigating such tensions, which is relevant to AMHP practice, social work more generally, and the wider arena of emancipatory research.