

# Where is the ‘evidence base’?

*Bizarrely, it's in a back room in Tottenham – at least, the bit that relates to evaluating interventions. For 10 years Drug and Alcohol Findings has been collecting, analysing and disseminating evaluation research. Here's how it started, and how it became the custodian of the largest working drug and alcohol library in Britain.*

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21 October 2009

Cast your mind back to the late 1990s. Then as now hats were doffed to the ‘evidence base’ and doing ‘what works’. A government-ordered Effectiveness Review had spawned NTORS, the largest ever UK drug treatment study, and the emerging results from the sample recruited in 1995 were making a case for expanded funding. On the practice side, £1 billion a year was being spent on tackling drug and alcohol problems and more was on the way.

But there was a problem. Research’s business was research, while practitioners were busy getting on with practice. It was the core business of neither to link up with the other. Researchers talked to each other in academic journals which practitioners did not read, or if they did, were in no position to interpret the findings. That would require placing each new study in the context of the world literature, which would mean finding and analysing that literature in the first place, an impossible task.

For all the supposed commitment to evidence-based practice, there was no vehicle for promoting it. It was a glaring contradiction which risked squandering the investment in both research and in practice.

That contradiction gave birth to the Drug and Alcohol Findings project, itself a coming together of Britain’s leading addiction research base at the National Addiction Centre, and the two national representative bodies for alcohol and drug services respectively: Alcohol Concern, and what was then the Standing Conference on Drug Abuse (SCODA). Midwifing the partnership was Mike Ashton, recently emerged from two decades at the Institute for the Study of Drug Dependence (ISDD), who became the project’s editor. ISDD later merged with SCODA to form DrugScope, but apart from that, the partnership has remained the same.

This tiny one-man project aimed to create the missing link between international research and practice in the UK. Then both ISDD and Alcohol Concern had thriving and internationally important libraries. Findings drew on those and later on the National Addiction Centre’s access to the academic literature. At first the resultant collection was nothing more than a convenience for the editor, with no pretensions, and no need, to duplicate the work of the partner agencies.

The project’s focus instead was on the production of the world’s first magazine for drug and alcohol practitioners devoted to bringing them lessons from international research on their work in a form they could understand and make use of. Ten years ago in 1999, the first edition was published.

It was and its successor remains a unique hybrid, not a dumbed-down research digest or a simple reproduction of research abstracts, but an alliance of scientific rigour with practitioner-friendly and practice-informed analysis and commentary. The Findings partnership believes it is and needs to be more rigorous than academic journals, because the aim is not to discuss and debate findings, but to put them in to practice in ways which will affect the lives of communities, clients, patients and young people. That it got some way towards this standard is visible in comments from researchers as well as practitioners.

Favourite one is from Dr A. Thomas McLellan, then Director of the Treatment Research Institute in Philadelphia and editor of the *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, now second in charge of President Obama's national drug policy unit: "I am ashamed to say I did not know of this journal but I am going to subscribe. I don't think I have ever seen so much useful and well integrated information in one place. I just started at the front and couldn't put [it] down ... keep up the great work." More comments on the web site.

There was start-up funding from project partners and from Action on Addiction and the Department of Health's Substance Misuse Advisory Service, then headed by Don Lavoie, and some indirect help along the way from the National Treatment Agency. But apart from this, the magazine was self-sustaining on subscriptions until in 2006 it hit the financial buffers and turned to the J. Paul Getty Jr. Charitable Trust and later the Pilgrim Trust for support.

Guided by them and by their adviser Peter Miller (and later by current adviser Samantha Gross), the project transformed itself in to a web-based publisher and database, offering free of charge everything subscribers had previously paid for, and much more. From a few hundred keen subscribers, now each month its analyses are downloaded over 25,000 times. Past magazine content and current analyses can be searched using a newly upgraded custom-made system, and downloaded and stored as PDF files on your computer for future reference. A click of the mouse takes you to related content and sources for original research articles and reviews.

But what of that back room? Its library grew and now numbers about 13,000 documents, nearly all the newer material stored and retrievable electronically. It is not directly available to the public (a longer term ambition), but it is indirectly available, because it forms the evidence base used to interpret the significance and meaning of each new research finding analysed and disseminated by the project. When Alcohol Concern and DrugScope recently divested themselves of their own libraries, it became the largest 'live' drug and alcohol library in Britain, and almost certainly one of the largest in the world – a twist of fate not foreseen at the start.

And what of the future? Falling by design between research and practice stools, funding remains a potential problem, but the commitment of the partners and the reason for the project's existence are as strong as ever, maybe more so. Above all, the project is fortified by the reactions of its practitioner users and the researchers whose work it subjects to its analyses.

Visit the project's web site and sign up for free bulletins on new research findings at <http://findings.org.uk>. The project is small, but by most accounts, pretty well perfectly formed, and there is still nothing like it anywhere else in the world.