Social engagement with health research: An outcome based assessment approach

Andrew Pleasant and Bruce Lewenstein, Dept. of Communication, Cornell University

Over the past century, the most important advances in health care worldwide have been knowledge-driven and the health of particular national or regional populations has been shaped by how this knowledge was generated, distributed, and used. The level of utilization of this knowledge, however, is often seen as inadequate (with "utilization" defined as the process by which various groups in society -- including policy makers, health practitioners, and the public -- interact with health research based on their needs).

An understanding of how knowledge produced by health research is utilized and what hurdles prevent fuller utilization is lacking. A systematic assessment of utilization and the expected outcomes from health research -- such as health system performance, health, health equity, and social and economic gains -- is clearly warranted. There are at least three dimensions of health research utilization -- in policy-making, in health care practice, and in social engagement. Desired outcomes of the interactions between social engagement and health research include improved health literacy, increased trust and social support for health research, and research-informed changes in health behavior leading directly to health gain.

This paper focuses on the development of a methodology to assess social engagement with health research; it outlines the parameters and theoretical constructs informing a broader outcome-based assessment of health research systems. This project will contribute to a better understanding of the structural and communicative relationships influencing social engagement with health research.