

**ISSUE 8, DECEMBER 2005**

Welcome to the eighth issue of Nexus News, the newsletter focusing on issues facing the public sector.

And yes, we know the silly season fast approaches, but you're not on holidays yet – so there's still time for a final word on one of this year's buzz topics.

**THE DEMAND: EVIDENCED-BASED**

Calls abound in the public sector (and in human services in particular) for evidence-based practice: the use of interventions that have been demonstrated to be effective via rigorous evaluation.

The gold standard of evidence-based evaluation design is the randomised controlled trial (RCT) or clinical trial. Yet close inspection of the drive for evidence-based practice can reveal the zealot's touch.

**UNIVERSAL TRUTH – OR IS IT?**

Smith & Pell have advanced the argument in their often-cited article in *BMJ (British Medical Journal)*, December 1003.

The authors point out that, like many interventions designed to improve the public's health and wellbeing, the effectiveness of the parachute has not been subjected to proper evaluation using randomised controlled trials.

Their exhaustive literature search revealed that the widespread use of these expensive and dangerous devices is based entirely on anecdotal evidence. And this is despite the fact that their use is associated with morbidity and mortality, due to intervention failure and, concerningly, iatrogenic complications.

Yet the dearth of stringent evaluation has continued despite natural history studies (peaking between 1914-1918) indicating that non-use is not consistently associated with an adverse outcome.

**ADDING VALUE**

At Nexus Management Consulting, we assist organisations to change for the better through a range of services:

**Strategic & corporate planning**, creating and implementing the blueprint

**Program evaluation**, measuring the outcomes and keeping goals and strategies on track

**Management review & organisation development**, aligning systems, business processes and structures

**Group facilitation**, adhering to a relevant agenda and producing meaningful results

**Strategic management training**, transferring skills to develop the internal capacity to create enduring change.

## STAND UP AND BE COUNTED

To eliminate the risk that the apparent protective effect of parachutes may be merely an example of the 'healthy cohort' effect, the authors call for the most radical protagonists of evidence-based practice to participate in a double blind, randomised, placebo-controlled, crossover trial of the parachute!

## BUT SERIOUSLY...

Clearly, as Smith & Pell conclude, "individuals who insist that all interventions need to be validated by a randomised controlled trial need to come down to earth with a bump."

While a commitment to testing assumptions and gathering quantitative and qualitative evidence to validate practice is critical, slavish devotion to scientific method can squander innovation and threaten good outcomes. Moreover, for many public sector interventions, an RCT is simply not viable.

Nexus has worked with many agencies and non-government organisations to help them **collect information about what really works** in a practical and cost-effective manner. A few examples are:

- Nexus worked with a whole-of-government management committee for the Early Childhood Intervention Co-ordination Program (administered by the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care) to **develop population indicators and performance measures**
- Nexus is currently finalising an evaluation of a domestic violence crisis intervention service run by a government department, where we validated anecdotal evidence from stakeholder focus groups with **quantitative data from police databases and client interviews**
- To help organisations conduct meaningful internal evaluations, Nexus develops **customised Evaluation Toolkits** incorporating outcomes hierarchies, characteristics of success and performance measures.

## FOR MORE DETAILS ON EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE:

- Read Smith & Pell's article in BMJ – [click here](#)
- Contact Greg Masters at Nexus [gmasters@nexusmc.com.au](mailto:gmasters@nexusmc.com.au) on (02) 9559 2468

## CONTACT US

Please continue to direct your ideas and comments to [gmasters@nexusmc.com.au](mailto:gmasters@nexusmc.com.au). If you'd like to see an article covering a particular issue, please let us know.

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#### **ABOUT NEXUS MANAGEMENT CONSULTING**

Established by Greg Masters in 1996, Nexus Management Consulting solves complex problems in public and community organisations. Nexus helps organisations develop practical strategies that clarify direction and make successful implementation more likely.

With substantial public sector expertise and a responsive approach, Nexus works with clients to assess management challenges and design processes to solve them. Nexus's services include:

- Strategic and corporate planning
- Program evaluation
- Management review & organisational development
- Group facilitation
- Strategic management training.