

Authors: Dr Celia Laur,^{1,2} Ann Marie Corrado,¹ Dr Noah Ivers¹

Edited by: Prof Sumantra Ray; coordination by James Bradfield; design by Matheus Abrantes

1. Women's College Hospital, Toronto, Ontario, Canada 2. NNEdPro Global Centre for Nutrition and Health, Cambridge, UK

Building on Success

Sustaining effective health services interventions using implementation science

With so much attention on what's new, including many new health service-related interventions developed during COVID-19, how can we make sure that strategies to improve patient care are continued into the future? Programmes, such as the delivery of food parcels to patients following cancer treatment, have shown early promise. Of course, these and other strategies need to be evaluated to see which can, and should, continue. However, an evaluation that shows 'success' does not necessarily mean the programme will be sustained (and vice-versa). To ensure lasting benefit we need to think about sustaining from the start!

The literature has many examples of quality improvement (QI) interventions that aim to ensure the reliable use of best practices that improve patient care. Examples of QI strategies include programmes to measure and report on quality of care, delivery of clinician and patient education, and reminder systems. Implementing any of these QI strategies takes time and effort. The investment of human and other resources may be worthwhile if patient care is improved, but the full return on investment will not be achieved if we do not think about how to sustain the QI strategies that work.

'Implementation science' explores how to change practice, building on knowledge from the fields of change management, behavioural science, and more.^{1,2} **The scientific community has learned a lot about how to start something new, and is increasingly realising that we need to couple that with knowledge of how to keep effective interventions going.**^{3,5}

It is naïve to think that if a health services intervention is effective it will automatically be continued. A systematic approach can help improve the odds of this occurring. We can learn from interventions that have continued long-term, by considering how they embedded the intervention into the facility or system, found and supported champions, and how they developed a business case to show value.

Researchers and 'knowledge users', such as those working in a hospital or community healthcare setting, can work together for success. **When those who are involved in a change can take ownership of what they are doing and see the benefit, a health service intervention is more likely to continue.** The nutrition field can learn from what we already know from 'implementation science', while also helping to inform the growing field of 'sustainability science'.



The latest research shows that we really should do something with all this research

KEY EVENTS

- 5th NNEdPro Cambridge Summer School in Applied Human Nutrition - September 2020: www.nnedpro.org.uk/summer-school
- 6th International Summit - September 2020: www.nnedpro.org.uk/summit

In light of the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, both events will be converted to online events only.

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For example, as diabetes is a chronic disease (linked with diet and nutrition), highly impacting healthcare resources, costs, societal impact, and health outcomes,⁶ we need to think about how to continue effective diabetes QI interventions. A study underway in Canada surveyed authors of diabetes QI interventions, finding that 78% of the studies included in a systematic review were said to improve quality of care.⁷ Of the effective interventions, 40% did not continue. Of those that did continue, sometimes it was only the ideas or resources that were sustained, not the full intervention. Or the intervention continued for a while but then stopped. Surprisingly, a few studies continued even though they were not effective!

Our work explores case studies from this aspect of the diabetes literature to unpack the complexity of implementation sustainability and identify key lessons for success. Several participants mentioned the need to work closely with knowledge users to understand what is needed in their facility. One knowledge user interviewed about their intervention that was sustained for several years indicated: *“We felt we owned it [the diabetes QI programme] and we had the authority to make our own decisions, [it] really helped us.”* Other participants indicated we need to learn from other fields, such as business or organisational management. We can also apply what we learn across content areas, such as to cancer care, another important area for nutrition.

A key aspect of sustainability is also knowing when to stop. If a QI programme is not working, it is taking time and resources away from other initiatives that may have greater benefit. To know if it's working, or not, we need to be monitoring through collection of relevant data. Data helps to show if it's an implementation problem (the intervention is not actually being run the way it is supposed to) or a problem with the intervention itself (the intervention is not the right fit for the problem).

Along with collecting data, here are a few tips to help you plan for sustainability in your QI programmes:

- Start planning early
- Work with those most impacted by the initiative
- Connect and align with existing QI programmes, when relevant
- Evaluate what you do. You won't know if it's working if you don't have the data
- Share the work. A champion is great, but don't be too reliant on one person
- Involve individuals with lived experience. They understand the real benefits and challenges of a programme
- Be flexible – what worked in one place may be different in another
- Seek leadership support and keep them informed
- Create a business case to show the value of what you're doing
- If you have funding, develop a 'maintenance protocol' to prepare for what happens if/when funding ends. Think about what can continue and what may need to stop
- Share successes and thank everyone involved.

The NNEdPro Global Centre for Nutrition and Health, headquartered in Cambridge UK, encourages sustainability of ideas through the development of regional networks and continuous collaboration. Initiatives are designed to be embedded into food, health and education systems and where things don't work, the lessons learned inform next steps, sustaining the ideas through to implementation and beyond.

When considering long-term planning, we should also be thinking about the long-term sustainability of our planet, including climate change and food security. NNEdPro's 2020 global strategy day will be considering responsibilities, actions and opportunities regarding issues of climate change and food security within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This event connects with our *6th International Summit on Medical Nutrition Education and Research*, which will be held virtually along with a webinar series in September 2020. The theme this year is A 2020 evaluation of global knowledge networks in the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2025). Details are available here: www.nnedpro.org.uk/summit

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