NHS top managers, knowledge exchange and leadership: the early development of Academic Health Science Networks – a mixed-methods study

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Declared competing interests of authors: none

Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

Published May 2017
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr05170

Plain English summary

The early development of Academic Health Science Networks
Health Services and Delivery Research 2017; Vol. 5: No. 17
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr05170

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Academic Health Science Networks (AHSNs) were set up in the English NHS to stimulate and spread innovations both to improve the health of the population and to contribute to a newer goal of wealth creation. AHSNs have a regional focus to operate as an innovation network, trying to bring different partners and sectors together to spread new ideas and knowledge at pace and scale.

This study responded to a call for research on how innovations and new knowledge could be spread more effectively in the NHS. It explored the emerging strategies and practices of the AHSNs as they tried to do this. We also looked at the leadership roles played by some key people.

We employed various research methods: a literature review; an analysis of national policy; an analysis of the shape and structure of networks as they developed, undertaken via two national surveys; case studies of five AHSNs and also of 10 specific innovations; and finally some in-depth interviews with people who had emerged as important ‘knowledge leaders’ (KLs).

Our core findings suggest that there were different networks emerging around the health and wealth goals of AHSNs; perhaps not surprisingly, the newer wealth networks were still at an early stage of development. These networks took different forms in different AHSNs. We developed a general model of the strategic approaches AHSNs took towards spreading new ideas and knowledge. Finally, we uncovered some of the characteristics and skills of ‘KLs’.

We hope that the study will be helpful to the AHSNs and the wider NHS in reviewing and developing future work on innovation. Finally, we make some recommendations for future research, including a longer-term assessment of AHSN impact.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HS&DR programme or one of its preceding programmes as project number 12/5002/19. The contractual start date was in September 2013. The final report began editorial review in April 2016 and was accepted for publication in January 2017. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HS&DR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors’ report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health.

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