Framework for the development and evaluation of complex interventions: gap analysis, workshop and consultation-informed update

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Plain English summary

Framework for complex interventions

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Plain English summary

Interventions are actions taken to make a change, for example heart surgery, an exercise programme or a smoking ban in public. Interventions are described as complex if they comprise several stages or parts or if the context in which they are delivered is complex.

A framework on how to develop and evaluate complex interventions was last published by the Medical Research Council in 2006 (Craig P, Dieppe P, Macintyre S, Michie S, Nazareth I, Petticrew M. *Developing and Evaluating Complex Interventions*. London: Medical Research Council; 2006). This document describes how the framework has been updated to include advances in research methods and thinking and presents the new framework document.

The updating process had four stages: (1) review of the literature to identify areas requiring update; (2) workshop of experts to discuss topics to update; (3) open consultation on a draft of the framework; and (4) writing the framework.

The updated framework divides the research process into four phases: development, feasibility, evaluation and implementation. Key updates include:

1. the definition of a complex intervention was changed to include both the content of the intervention and the context in which it is conducted
2. addition of systems thinking methods: an approach that considers the broader system an intervention sits within
3. more emphasis on interventions that are not developed by researchers (e.g. policy changes and health services delivery)
4. emphasis on the usefulness of evidence as the key goal of complex intervention research
5. identification of six elements to be addressed throughout the research process: context; theory refinement and testing; stakeholder involvement; identification of key uncertainties; intervention refinement; and economic considerations.

The updated framework is intended to help those involved in funding and designing research to consider a range of approaches, questions and methods and to choose the most appropriate. It also aims to help researchers conduct and report research that is as useful as possible to users of research.

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This report

This issue of the Health Technology Assessment journal series contains a project commissioned by the Medical Research Council's (MRC) Population Health Sciences Group (PHSG). Jointly funded by the MRC and NIHR, the work refreshed the previous version of the Medical Research Council framework for development and evaluation of complex interventions: A comprehensive guidance (2006).

PHSG is responsible for developing the MRC's strategy for research to improve population health. NIHR's mission is to improve the health and wealth of the nation through research. As population level interventions in community and clinical settings become more important, and as science advances and innovates, both funding partners agreed that updating the existing framework was timely and needed.

The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. This report has been published following a shortened production process and, therefore, did not undergo the usual number of proof stages and opportunities for correction. The Health Technology Assessment (HTA) programme editors and publisher have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

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