

# PUBLIC DECISIONS THE ROLE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Pierre-Gerlier Forest, Ph.D., FCAHS  
President, Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation

Baltimore (MD) [26-iii-13]

FONDATION  
TRUDEAU  
FOUNDATION



# THE NEED FOR EVIDENCE IN POLICY-MAKING



- Politics as the collective ability to attain goals in the face of obstacles by means of decisions
- Goals are based on wants, beliefs, and desires: difficult to change
- Evidence most needed on real nature of obstacles and appropriateness of decisions

# TWO VISIONS OF RESEARCH UPTAKE

- **Competition:** research evidence has to struggle to impose itself in the policy world, where it will eventually triumph over lesser forms of knowledge
- **Conciliation:** research evidence is welcome in the policy world, where it has to accommodate with other forms of knowledge

# THE COMPETITION MODEL

## JONATHAN LOMAS



- Research and policy as parallel and (usually) distant processes
- Findings must compete with other sources of persuasion
- Research results naturally rejected, discounted, or ignored
- Conflict and disagreement feed on uncertainty and multiple interpretations of reality

# CONDITIONS OF TRANSFER



- Valuable knowledge worthless without transfer to and use by decision makers
- Essential to involve decision makers at early stages of the research process
- Essential to bring research and researchers into the policymaking process
- Success is measured by adoption of proposed solutions

# DOES IT WORK?



- Not all research of equal quality or importance (hierarchy of evidence)
- Not all decision-makers or decision-making processes created equal
- Still to be proven that a special interest in research implies that one makes better policy decisions
- Expert advice can help to clarify issues or constraints, but it is also likely to increase conflict

# THE CONCILIATION MODEL

## MARK A PETERSON



- **Ordinary knowledge:** a way to anticipate how the public would understand and react to policy formulations
- **Distributional knowledge:** impact of policy options and intensity of the response from particular groups and communities
- **Policy analytic knowledge:** documentation, analysis, and prescription, using the “methods of science”

# CONDITIONS OF CONCILIATION



- Availability (of relevant knowledge)
- Consistency (between sources)
- Agreement (among champions)
- Incentives (for decision-makers)
- Capacity (to actually decide)



# POLICIES AND DECISIONS



- Governments exist to make decisions
- In most situations, different people are in charge of policy-making and decision-making
- A policy that cannot be translated into a discrete sequence of decisions will never be implemented
- Decisions are made in a given context, of which policies are or aren't part

# PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS



- Problems with solutions
- Solutions with benefits
- Benefits without delay
- Delays (sometimes come) with advantages

# DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY



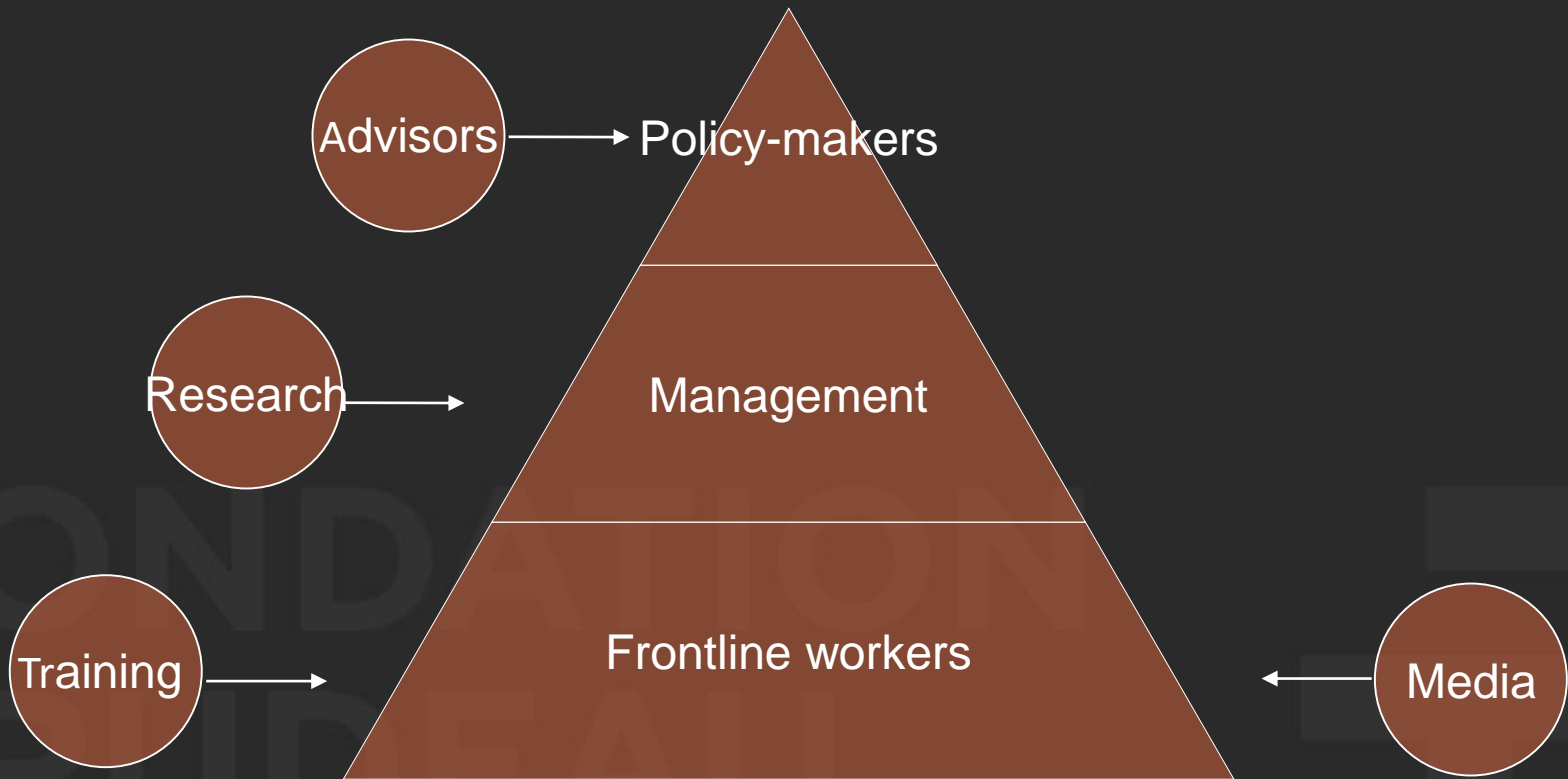
- Substantial uncertainty
- Limited knowledge of causal factors
- Sense of urgency
- Inevitably, winners and losers

# HEALTH SECTOR IS SPECIAL



- Tragic consequences
- Primacy of evidence
- Ever-changing knowledge base
- Innumerable stakeholders
- Multiple arenas

# THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO KT / 1



# THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO KT / 2



- Different sources of knowledge in disconnection
- Research used to bring legitimacy to decisions already taken
- Experience not part of expertise
- Ethos of science easily displaced by worship of power

# LEARNING NETWORKS / 1



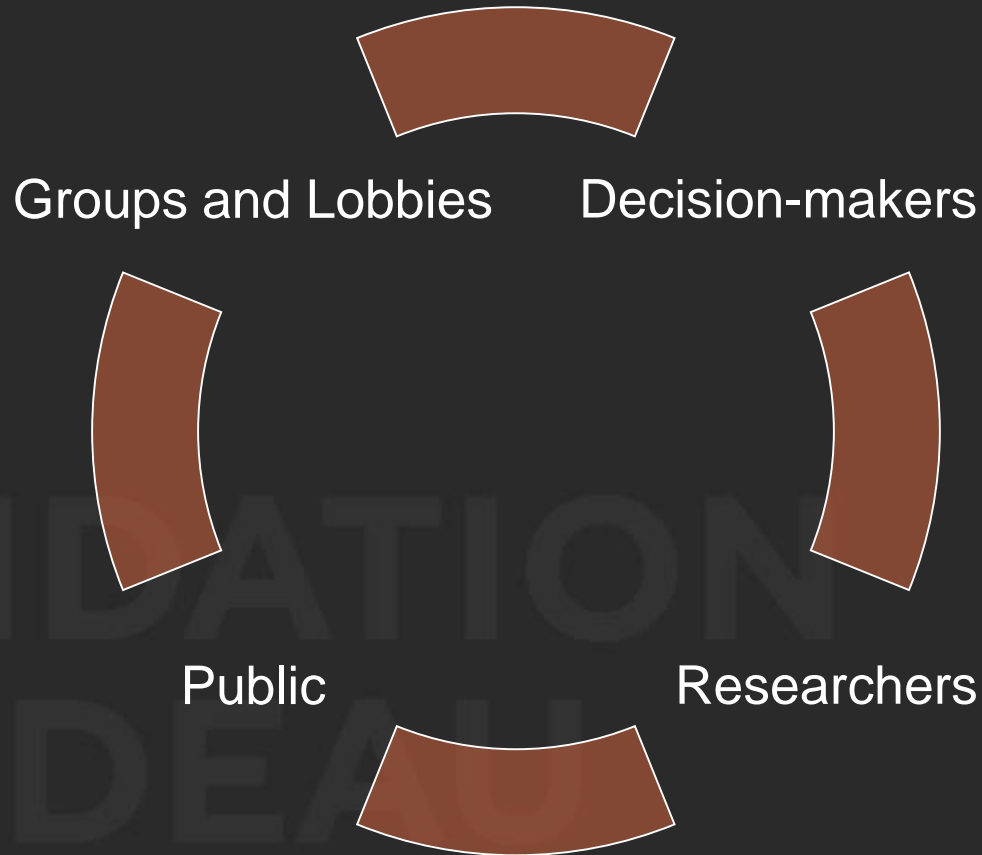
- Integrated through a shared culture and shared values and informal social relations
- Breaking down boundaries with the environment, especially with other organizations
- Personal attributes of reputation and trust govern relationships and exchanges

FONDATION

TRUDEAU

FOUNDATION

# LEARNING NETWORKS / 2



The “Public Sphere” approach



# OPTING FOR A MODEL



- Approach in accordance with new emphasis on transparency and accountability
- Decision not limited to experts  
(public is aware of policy alternatives)
- Evidence matters, but politics matters more

# ONE FINAL WORD ABOUT KT



- Celebration of science is not KT
- Manipulation of public opinion is not KT
- It's not even sure KT is about education or dissemination
- KT is about sharing questions and options

# PRIORITIES



- The Prince or the public?
- Politics or policy?
- Health or health care?
- Science or social science?