

The RCSLT conference in Leeds in September 2014 encouraged us to ‘Mind the Gap’ between research and practice. Over two days, researchers,

clinicians and service managers had the opportunity to discuss evidence-based practice and share new innovations.

The drive behind this is to ensure new research findings are disseminated and implemented into clinical practice as quickly as possible. However, how can we be sure the research undertaken is what clinicians working with individuals with speech, language and communication impairments need most? While many researchers in the field have a background as practising SLTs, current clinicians have a clearer picture of the needs on the ground.

This issue was the motivation behind the workshop run at the conference by the Specialists in Specific Speech Impairment (SSSI) Network. The network consists of researchers, academics and specialist clinicians with a record of research and publications in the field of developmental speech impairment. The workshop aimed to develop a clinically-driven research agenda that meets the needs of children with speech impairment, as identified by clinicians.

Nominal group technique

The workshop used nominal group technique to get a clear picture of the research needs of clinicians (Van de Ven and Delbecq, 1972). We limited the number of attendees to 18, split into two groups to enable sufficient time for each individual to contribute. We asked each attendee to consider their clinical uncertainties and write down research ideas. Each presented one of their ideas, starting with the one they were most passionate about. Facilitators asked for clarification where necessary and other members of the group refined their own list in light of those presented.

The attendees identified 58 research topics, sorted these into 10 initial coherent themes and prioritised them in terms of greatest need. Specifically, we asked them to independently identify and rank the five themes they considered most important. With these rankings, we assigned a score to each theme, with higher scores representing a higher ranking identifying the priority (table one).

Research in specific speech impairment

Yvonne Wren and colleagues ask, what questions should we be posing?

Table one: Themes of research ideas and ranking scores

Service delivery	65
Classification and subgrouping	55
Intelligibility/connected speech/generalisation	43
Prognostic indicators	41
Direct versus other provision	36
Using research	19
Views of the child	13
Bilingualism	9
Co-morbidity	8
Instrumental tools	4

Post workshop activity

While the prioritisation activity suggested service delivery was the area which attendees felt needed research most, it was clear from comments made that this category included a number of sub-themes. A post-workshop meeting of the SSSI Network allowed a second review of the questions. This confirmed that the initial broad categorisations remained valid. However, we added an additional theme of ‘Approaches to intervention’ and subdivided the ‘Service delivery’ into 13 subthemes based on the research questions generated in the workshop (figure one).

We shared this revised categorisation with workshop attendees by email and asked them to submit new priorities. To widen participation, we also invited members of the clinical excellence networks

(CENs) in speech from London, the south west and the north east, and clinicians interested in speech sound disorders, contacted via the RCSLT links system in Northern Ireland, to indicate their preferred priorities for research. From a total of 51 responses, research questions which address ‘Approaches to intervention’ received the highest priority ranking with questions relating to ‘service delivery-dosage’ and ‘prognostic indicators’ also rating highly (figure one).

What’s next?

The primary aim of this workshop activity was to inform the research community about the key priorities for research in the field of specific speech impairment. The SSSI Network will use the individual clinicians’ questions, which led to the development of the themes, as indicators of need and drivers for future research programmes. Moreover, the attendees of the workshop, together with members of the CENs, are and will continue to be valued colleagues to the network, as we seek to involve practitioners in the process of research at all stages – from identifying research priorities and setting questions, through to data collection and analysis, and on to disseminating the results.

However, one notable finding from the workshop was the number of questions proposed for which some research evidence already exists. It wasn’t possible during the workshop to explore whether the questions were suggested because individuals were unaware of the relevant research or whether they regarded the evidence as weak (ie, either lacking or ambiguous).

With regard to research awareness, new initiatives such as the RCSLT journals collection and The Communication Trust's 'What Works?' database are helping to enable SLTs to access the evidence base but time constraints and difficulties with reconciling conflicting sources of information can make it difficult for clinicians to integrate this knowledge into everyday practice. While the evidence base is expanding all the time, the evidence for many issues remains at a relatively low level with few systematic reviews and meta-analyses available. It is, therefore, not surprising that workshop attendees included these questions within their priorities for research.

Patient and public involvement

The workshop enabled the SSSI Network to engage with clinicians about their priorities for research. Whilst the network also includes specialist clinicians, there is a danger that with a small group of researchers, biases regarding research priorities can creep in. The workshop will help the network to ensure future research in the field focuses on the most important and relevant questions.

Nevertheless, clinician opinion alone is insufficient as a base to research activity.

“The workshop will help the network ensure future research focuses on relevant questions”

Patient and public involvement in any NHS research (NIHR) is a must today and indeed, knowing what matters most to the parents and children we work with is crucial to our understanding of where research efforts should be targeted. As the range of people who commission our services increases, there is a need for funded research to answer clinical questions that have greatest relevance for all stakeholders. Researchers within the network will seek to better understand these clinical uncertainties in order to identify an overarching plan of research priorities in the field of developmental speech impairment that has maximum impact. ■

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References & resources

Van de Ven AH, Delbecq AL. The nominal group as a research instrument for exploratory health studies. *American Journal of Public Health* 1972; 62:3, 337-342.

National Institute for Health Research, Research Design Service. *RDS patient and public involvement handbook*. <http://tinyurl.com/q247vf9>

RCSLT Journals Collection. www.rcslt.org/members/research_centre/journals_library_service

The Communication Trust. 'What Works' database. www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/whatworks

Figure one: Categorisation of research questions/ideas into themes and subthemes (numbers in brackets show the scores for the prioritisation task)

