PostScript

BOOK REVIEWS

Evaluation in Health Promotion: Principles and Perspectives.

Edited by I Rootman, M Goodstadt, B Hyndman, D McQueen, L Potvin, J Springett, E Ziglio. (Pp 533.) WHO Regional Publications, European Series, No 92. Denmark: World Health Organization, 2001. ISBN 92-890-1359-1.

Evaluation continues to present health promotion researchers, practitioners, and policy makers with many challenges—conceptual, theoretical, and practical. All organizations and individuals involved in health promotion are familiar with the pressure from inside and outside the field to demonstrate that health promotion “works”. Proving that health promotion is a “worthwhile” investment for governments, non-government organizations, the community sector, and the private sector is a major external pressure on the field. Ensuring that practice is “evidence based”, of high quality, and effective is a powerful internal pressure.

In many ways, it is little wonder that evaluation continues to challenge us. As this book highlights, there are multiple definitions and no general theory of health promotion. The work addresses the complex array of factors that influence the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and populations, and practitioners and researchers in the field draw from a variety of disciplines to plan, implement, and evaluate our work. These complexities have been compounded by a growing understanding that different societies and cultures approach health promotion in general, and evaluation in particular, in different ways. In recognition of this, the book is limited to evaluation work in western, industrialised societies (p 5).

The book is the outcome of the deliberations of a WHO Working Group on Health Promotion Evaluation established by the European Regional Office. It is the fourth product of the collaboration and is comprised of papers commissioned by the working group or submitted for its consideration. The members of the working group represent diverse perspectives, and came from Canada, Europe, and the United States; from governments, WHO, and the academic community; and from different evaluation backgrounds (p 3).

The goal of the publication was “to stimulate and support innovative approaches to the evaluation and practice of health promotion, by reviewing the theory and best practice of evaluation and by producing guidelines and recommendations for health promotion policy-makers and practitioners, concerning evaluation of health promotion approaches” (p 3). The book includes five parts: introduction and framework, perspectives, settings, policies and systems, and a final synthesis and conclusion. The middle parts include multiple chapters, addressing conceptual, theoretical, and methodological issues. Most illustrate these using case studies. The

book does not purport to be a methodology textbook—methodology is, rather, considered to be only one of the issues of importance in health promotion evaluation. The chapters focus on issues pertinent to evaluating health promotion in settings, and the aim is to influence policies and systems. A broad view is taken of what constitutes evidence, suggesting that this is entirely appropriate to health promotion (p 5–6).

The quality of the chapters is uniformly high—well written, conceptually challenging but accessible, and comprehensively referenced. It is refreshing and stimulating to find a work on evaluation that is not fixated on research methodology and design. The editors/contributors clearly understand the need for rigorous research design in health promotion evaluation and for the use of evidence to guide practice, research, and policy in health promotion as in other health sciences. However, overall, the book reflects the view that methodological issues should follow, not lead, the design and implementation of health promotion and its evaluation. And there are, after all, many existing texts on research methods for health promotion evaluation.

The book is intended, principally, for experienced practitioners, researchers, and policy makers—for professionals who have grappled with many of these issues in the course of our work. It is not a “how to” guide—rather, it explores the current state of the science and art in relation to contemporary health promotion and its evaluation.

The chapters are relatively brief, providing an informed summary of the literature and evidence rather than an in-depth exploration of the topic. Nonetheless, the analysis and discussion are not superficial. Each of the chapters addresses a major debate in contemporary health promotion, illuminates the major points at issue, and suggests some ways forward. For this reviewer, the chapters on “what counts as evidence”, on “evaluation of quality of life”, on “policy networks for health”, on “evaluation of countrywide health promotion policies”, and on “investment for health” were of particular interest.

The book concludes with recommendations for health promotion policy makers about ways to foster more appropriate evaluations of health promotion, and with a generic logic model for planning and evaluating health promotion. In light of the considerable strengths of the book, the recommendations were somewhat disappointing. This is, perhaps, because they could be written only for an international audience. But there was little new in the recommendations although, taken as a set of principles for good practice they do provide a useful guide.

The generic logic model for planning and evaluating health promotion, however, is a useful, if complex contribution to the field in general and evaluation in particular. The quest for a comprehensive logic model that describes and explains the complex array of factors that influence the health of individuals and populations is likely to continue for some time to come. This refinement, though, will assist practitioners, researchers and policy makers to review our practice and to at least design more appropriate, effective evaluations.

The contributors have outlined conceptual, theoretical, and practical issues that must be addressed if we are to improve the quality and range of evaluation of health promotion initiatives to change settings, policies and systems. There are, of course, many remaining questions with regard to the practice of health promotion evaluation. Reading the book highlights the large gap between the technical capacity that is available to guide and undertake effective evaluation and the relatively limited application of this in practice. The book did not seek to address this gap, although the recommendations to policy makers essentially seek to bridge it. But much more will be needed if the ideas and challenges presented in the book are to be translated into action. The systematic, routine adoption of the recommendations is, itself, a variation on a health promotion intervention, and the evaluation of methods to ensure this a further challenge.

In all, the book is highly recommended as a conceptual guide to contemporary health promotion evaluation.

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Driving Lessons. Exploring systems that make traffic safer.

Edited by J P Rothe. (Pp 343.) University of Alberta Press, Edmonton, 2002. ISBN 0-88864-370-5.

This book arose from the multidisciplinary “Mission Possible Traffic-Safety Conference, Traffic Safety Summit ‘98”. The aim of the conference was to challenge traditional thinking and roles in traffic safety and the book is intended to continue this process. This is not just another collection of submitted papers presented at a conference, but rather invited articles on relevant, creative, and non-traditional topics written specifically for the book and designed to continue the discussion and debate that started at the conference.

The 20 chapters are divided into three parts covering the personal, institutional, and technical aspects of driving. Each chapter is written by a different expert, most authors are Canadian and a couple are from the USA. Each chapter underwent critical peer review.

The introductory chapter is on cybernetics, a topic I am not familiar with. Nevertheless, the framework and application to traffic safety was clear and I found it useful. Chapters in the personal section put driving in a social context. Contributors wrote from professional backgrounds in mental and physical health, social, and cultural analysis. Each chapter covers a different aspect of cognitive and behavioural influence on driving.

Section two covers institutional systems, the law, the economy, the media, and education. Among the topics is the conflict of traffic safety and business economics, one of the several aspects of road safety that are not

usually included in academic journals. Voluntary organisations and their influence on the traffic related court system are also included.

In the third section, on technical aspects of driving, some interesting questions are asked. For example, if we know so much and if we have the technology to control some unsafe aspects of driving, why is driving not safer? The fact is that no-one drives perfectly all of the time, so that perhaps the aim is to cater for the imperfect driver, so that our mistakes are not necessarily fatal.

I enjoyed reading the articles and pondering the mix of culture, economics, politics, and social behaviour that is involved in driving. I found my thinking extended beyond the usual topics of road-user behaviour, medical outcomes, and road engineering. The thorough reference list was helpful, although the omission of an index was a disappointment.

Anyone with an interest in traffic safety should find the alternative ideas in this book interesting and stimulating.

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CALENDAR

XXII Congress of the International Association for Suicide Prevention

10–14 September 2003, Stockholm. Details: Congress Secretariat, tel +46 8 5465 15 00; fax +46 8 5465 15 99; email iasp2003@stocon.se.

19th International Traffic Medicine Conference 2003

14–17 September 2003, Budapest, Hungary. Details: www.itma2003.hu.

Canadian Injury Prevention Conference 2003

23–25 November 2003, Ottawa. The meeting will build on the national conference held in 2000 and will focus on unintentional injury, violence, and suicide prevention. Organised jointly by Smartrisk, Safe Kids Canada and the Safe Communities Foundation, it aims to highlight the latest science and best practices in policy and programs; bridge the gap

between research and practice by highlighting specific policy and practice recommendations stemming from Canadian research and targeted research needs identified through community practice; encourage networking and collaboration between different sectors to promote action and policy change; facilitate participation from stakeholders representing vulnerable populations; build momentum for sustained action from stakeholders at the municipal, regional, provincial, and national levels; and further the activities of the Canadian Injury Research Network and the Canadian Institutes for Health Research in building. Details: www.safekidscanada.com/CIPC/default.html.

7th World Conference on Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion

6–9 June 2004, Vienna. The major objectives of the conference are strengthening violence and injury prevention as an aspect of national public health policy and programs; producing synergy of the combined efforts of various violence and injury prevention disciplines; exchanging the most recent experiences in research and practice; and facilitating participation of experts from low income countries. Details: www.safety2004.info.

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