CHAPTER SIXTEEN
WORKING WITH WINDOWS:
TRANSLATING DRUG RESEARCH
INTO DRUG POLICY

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW
Translating research evidence into policy and practice has become an increasingly important issue in the alcohol and other drug field, both in Australia and overseas. Yet the interface between research and policy has typically been studied in the fields of public policy and administration. John Kingdon, in his classic work of political science and public policy, *Agendas, alternatives and public policies* (1995), provides a powerful, evidence-based framework for understanding how some policy ideas come to fruition while others wither away. Kingdon also examines the role research plays in this process. This chapter outlines Kingdon’s multiple-streams model and applies it to a Western Australian case study that examines the processes involved in translating drink-driving research into innovative policy changes. This chapter also canvases the issues that need to be considered by those interested in translating research into policy and suggests steps that can be taken to improve this translation.

KEY TERMS
• advocacy
• drink-driving
• knowledge transfer
• legislative change
• media
• policy
• policy entrepreneurs
• policy windows
• politics
• research

INTRODUCTION
In Australia, as elsewhere, the interface between research and policy has typically been studied in the fields of public policy and administration (e.g. Colebatch 2006; Edwards 2004) and health policy (e.g. Lin & Gibson 2003). However, over the last 15 years there has been growing interest in the alcohol and other drug (AOD) field about the translation of research evidence into policy. For example a meeting on the
interaction of alcohol research and policy was organised by the Kertil Bruun Society in January 1992. In addition to the international presentations, a number of papers focused on Australasian case studies on topics such as random breath testing (Homel 1993), smoke-free environments (Carr-Gregg 1993), the labelling of alcohol beverage containers (Stockwell 1993) and national alcohol policy (Casswell, Stewart & Duignan 1993; Hawks 1993). In an important commentary paper, Secker (1993)—who as a former Director of Liquor Licensing in Western Australia (WA) had been a policy insider—pointed to researchers’ widespread ignorance of the processes involved in formulating government policy. Indeed, looking again at these case studies, there is strikingly little reference to the theoretical and scientific literature on translation of research into policy from other disciplines, something that is addressed in more recent Australian literature (e.g. Lenton 2004; Ritter et al. 2007).

THEORISING THE POLICY PROCESS

There are a number of theoretical approaches to understanding the policy process (see Box 16.1). The theory of ‘institutional rational choice’ (e.g. Ostrom 1986) explains how institutional rules affect the behaviour of individuals who, in this model, are viewed as rational actors motivated by self-interest. The ‘enlightenment’ model (Weiss 1977) explains how research can have an incremental impact on the belief systems of policy makers over time. ‘Punctuated-equilibrium’ theory (Baumgartner & Jones 1993) attempts to explain why political processes typically produce stability and incrementalism, but sometimes lead to discontinuous, abrupt change. The ‘advocacy-coalition’ framework focuses on the interaction between coalitions of advocates across institutions who share policy beliefs and operate within a shared policy subsystem (Sabatier 1988). The ‘policy diffusion’ framework (Berry & Berry 1999) tries to explain variations in the adoption of policy innovations across different jurisdictions.

Among these various theories relating to policy change, Kingdon’s ‘multiple-streams’ approach (Kingdon 1984, 1995) is, internationally, one of the most cited and influential. Kingdon provides a powerful, evidence-based framework for understanding how some policy ideas come to fruition whereas others wither away. He also examines the role played by research in this process. In this chapter, Kingdon’s framework is explored in detail as it provides the closest fit with my experiences of research translation, and those of others (e.g. Zahariadis 1998). Kingdon’s framework also provides insights into the steps that researchers must take if they are to maximise the impact of their research on policy.

**BOX 16.1 WAYS OF THEORISING THE POLICY PROCESS**

- **Institutional rational-choice** theory explains how institutional rules affect the behaviour of individuals who are viewed as rational actors motivated by self-interest. The model assumes that individuals can specify their resources, have the ability to process information, can evaluate outcomes and actions, and have criteria for selecting actions. It also assumes that the decision-making context includes institutional arrangements (i.e. rules allowing, demanding or prohibiting certain actions), physical world attributes and community characteristics. Public policies are seen as examples of institutional arrangements as they guide the behaviour of individuals and bureaucrats (Schlager & Bierstat 1996).

- The ‘enlightenment’ model explains how research can have an incremental impact on the belief systems of policy makers over time. It assumes that policy change occurs slowly, and that small, incremental changes in the way things are currently done, and as a result, policy change occurs gradually. Thus, changes occur by ‘branching’ (i.e. through successive limited extensions) rather than by ‘boom’ (i.e. through rational and comprehensive analysis) (Lindblom 1959).

- The ‘punctuated-equilibrium’ theory attempts to explain why political processes typically produce stability and incrementalism, but sometimes lead to discontinuous, abrupt change. It argues that both small and large changes are important elements of the policy process. As issues are defined in the public discourse in different ways, existing policies are either reinforced or challenged. Periods of equilibrium or stasis typically occur when an issue is under the control of a policy subsystem (e.g. the ‘drug sector’) and periods of inequilibrium occur when the issue is thrust onto the macro-political agenda (True, Jones & Baumgartner 1999).

- The ‘advocacy-coalition’ framework focuses on the interaction between coalitions of advocates across institutions who share policy beliefs and operate within a shared policy subsystem. The policy subsystem is the basic focus of analysis but it is constrained and affected by external factors such as socioeconomic conditions and the effects of relatively stable system parameters such as the social structure. Members of advocacy coalitions act together to achieve shared policy goals based on their belief systems (Sabatier 1988).

- The ‘policy diffusion’ framework tries to explain variations in the adoption of policy innovations across different jurisdictions. This policy innovation may be new to the specific government adopting it, but it may have been invented many years before and applied in many other jurisdictions. Adoption is seen as a function of both the characteristics of specific political systems (internal determinants) and those of a variety of diffusion processes (Berry & Berry 1999).

**Kingdon’s multiple-streams model**

Kingdon’s model was based on 247 lengthy qualitative and quantitative interviews with people inside and outside government in the US federal arena, who were close to decision making in the Health and Transportation portfolios. The interviews were conducted in four waves from 1976 to 1979. The central idea of Kingdon’s model is that brief opportunities for action on given initiatives, what he calls ‘policy windows’, open and close. However, the process of setting agendas does not occur randomly, but rather by bringing together three streams of activity: problems, policy and politics (see Box 16.2). Kingdon argues that, typically, visible participants affect the policy agenda and hidden participants influence the policy alternatives. Visible participants include politicians, media commentators, political parties and campaigning organisations, while hidden participants include academic specialists, career bureaucrats and government advisers and staff.
Because the cannabis work has been well documented elsewhere (e.g. Lenton 2004), I focus here on work contributing to the formulation of legislative and other responses to repeat drink-driving in WA.

In November 1999, following a string of serious drink-driving accidents, a WA magistrate called for the revision of drink-driving sentencing options after having had no option but to jail four repeat drink-driving offenders who already had outstanding fines (Gibson 1999). Soon after, the state government, through the Road Safety Council (RSC), asked the Task Force on Drink, Drugs and Driving (TFDDD) to advise on increasing the penalties for repeat drink-driving offenders. The Task Force, of which I was a member, responded that the first step should be a study of repeat drink-driving to improve understanding of the individual and situational factors involved.

In March 2000, in response to a call from the RSC, a proposal was submitted by two members of the TFDDD (including myself) to conduct a study of repeat drink-driving. The study commenced in April 2001 and involved three components: a review of the international literature on drink-driving, an analysis of data on repeat drink-drivers in WA, and in-depth interviews with 40 repeat drink-drivers. Consistent with Kingdon’s model, the ensuing report (Fetherston, Lenton & Cercarelli 2002) coupled a greater understanding of the problem with some viable policy options. These policy options were evidence-based and were likely to be supported by the public and politicians. The report concluded that there were no strong grounds for recommending harsher penalties for drink-driving. Rather, it made 21 recommendations on how existing strategies for repeat drink-drivers could be made more effective, and suggested additional specific countermeasures to address this high-risk group. Importantly, while acknowledging the deterrent value of licence suspension in countering drink-driving among the majority of drivers, the report recommended that strategies aimed at repeat drink-drivers needed to consider the high rates of unlicensed driving in this group (typically 70%). Any strategies adopted should aim to keep these offenders operating within the law wherever possible in order to limit the incidence of unlicensed driving. The report also recommended that alcohol interlock devices be introduced as an option for those offenders under licence suspension. Specific consideration was given to the fact that drink-drivers of low income, who may not be able to pay to have a device fitted to their vehicle, may be just the group for whom the community would get the greatest road safety benefit if an interlock was installed in their vehicle. To address the low rate of interlock installation in existing programs elsewhere, flexible options were recommended including waiving fines to offset the cost of installing and maintaining interlocks. Additionally, as the research suggested that 90% of repeat offenders had a serious alcohol problem, the report recommended that responses include an assessment for alcohol problems and referral to alcohol treatment. Policy issues regarding the difficulties associated with public transport and taxis for intoxicated patrons, and the role of security staff, were also raised (Fetherston, Lenton & Cercarelli 2002).

The report was launched with extensive media coverage by the WA Police Minister in January 2003. The media coverage included members of the Western Warriors, the state cricket team, blowing into vehicle interlock devices after having consumed alcohol.
The Minister was quoted in the press as stating that, ‘This is a very significant report and one which suggests we need to look at alternative strategies for recidivist drink-drivers’ (Robb 2003).

When the draft report was being reviewed by key stakeholders, government contacts made it clear to the authors that the report was more likely to result in government action if it suggested a mechanism to translate its major recommendations into action. The success of the translation of previous cannabis research into legislative change was noted (Lenton 2004) and an attempt was made to apply the lessons from this experience. Consequently (and in a way that is consistent with the role of Kingston’s policy entrepreneur as a broker of people and ideas) the report recommended that an expert working group be established by the government under the auspices of the TFDD. The working group would review the research and advise the RSC on its policy implications and the implementation of specific recommendations. Additionally, the report recommended that the working group:

- be given a finite time frame of three to four months in which to report
- include an independent road safety expert from outside the state who could provide ongoing feedback on the working group’s deliberations
- be provided with adequate human resources to support its activities
- include specific stakeholder agencies from across and outside the government.

Soon after the research report’s release, the RSC established an expert working group—the Repeat Drink-Driving Working Group (RDDWG)—as recommended by Fetherston, Lenton and Cerccarelli (2002). I was appointed to the RDDWG as a research representative, and a drug policy officer with experience in and outside government was appointed as executive officer.

The RDDWG convened in January 2003 and submitted its report to the RSC (Repeat Drink-Driving Working Group, unpublished) in November of that year. The main features of the Repeat Drink-Driving Program as presented in the report are outlined in Box 16.3. At about the same time, the recommended model was presented at the fourth International Alcohol Interlock Programs Symposium in the USA (Hands 2003), where it was endorsed as international best practice by the Chairman of the International Council on Alcohol, Drugs and Traffic Safety, Interlock Committee (Beineaux, pers. comm.).

In seeking community reaction to the recommendations in the RDDWG’s report, the RSC released a discussion paper in January 2004, which summarised the background, underlying principles and proposed program for responding to repeat drink-driving (Road Safety Council of Western Australia 2004). The public comments received overwhelmingly supported the report’s recommendations.

BOX 16.3 GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND KEY ELEMENTS OF THE REPEAT DRINK-DRIVING PROGRAM

**Goal**
To reduce repeat drink-driving and the associated harm to the community.
Part 4  Transferring knowledge

- Initiatives to limit unlicensed driving and driving outside licence conditions to maintain the integrity of drink-driving countermeasures including compulsorily carrying of licence for all drivers and riders
- Increased random licence checks by police
- New penalties for unlicensed driving including vehicle sanctions with provision for immediate roadside vehicle impoundment for first offenders and court-imposed vehicle confiscation for repeat offenders
- Additional recommendations specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Following the submission of its report, the RDDWG was disbanded and my involvement was limited largely to commenting to the media as a person outside the WA Government. The RDDWG’s policy recommendations appear to have gone through a number of transformations during their ongoing gestation within the WA Government. Contributing factors include: budgetary concerns, resistance by government agencies involved in the implementation of the program, two changes of Police Minister and a state election (which resulted in the incumbent Labor Party being returned but also caused significant delays in the required development and legislative processes). Some observers believed that the form and detail of the proposals under consideration seemed to have changed somewhat from the recommendations in the RDDWG’s report. Nevertheless, the program of legislation, funding and supporting initiatives (that at the time of writing [Septembre 2007] was still awaiting drafting for presentation to the WA Parliament) largely incorporates the spirit and features of the RDDWG’s recommended program. This seems largely due to the commitment of some players within the WA Government, and especially to the persistence, skill and dedication of RDDWG’s executive officer. The RDDWG’s executive officer led the project from its inception and, as the program’s chief advocate and broker, had the rare opportunity to move fluidly across academic, policy and government adviser roles. Of course the legislation is yet to be tabled in the WA Parliament and it is yet to be seen what changes are made through the parliamentary process and, beyond the legislation, in the implementation phase. However, applying Kingdom’s model, there are a number of useful insights that emerge from the way in which this case study has unfolded.

REFLECTING ON THE CASE STUDY
The softening-up phase

The drink-driving issue was already on the government’s agenda through events unfolding in Kingdom’s problem stream, such as serious drink-driving accidents and the magistrate’s statements, both of which had been covered in the media. These provided initial momentum for the issue in the policy and politics streams. In this case, the researchers were already on the ‘inside’ of the policy stream through their membership of the TFDDD and through the involvement of the RSC. This provided an opportunity to reinforce the importance of repeat drink-driving to those in government. At the same time, researchers started to lobby for a refocus of the policy responses away from simply increasing penalties to an evidence-based scheme that built on a better understanding of drink-driving and of the people who engaged in it.

Policy windows and policy entrepreneurs

In the drink-driving case presented here, the policy window was already opened by events in the policy and problem streams. Nevertheless, consulting with the government on the best way to turn the report’s findings and recommendations into policy action and recommending the establishment of the RDDWG are examples of taking a ‘behind-the-scenes’ policy entrepreneur role. As described by Kingdom, this ‘brought together people and ideas’. Consistent with this, the Police Minister’s central involvement in the media launch of the research findings marked the bringing together of the politics, policy and problem streams.

Extent of government support and endorsement

The RDDWG was not established with ministerial authority or cabinet endorsement. Thus, it was difficult to get some of the relevant departments to send a representative or to take ownership of the program. There was also always a question of the extent to which those present were speaking with the authority and support of their relevant departments or whether their involvement was primarily as interested individuals. This became apparent when the RDDWG’s report was required to produce an indicative budget for implementing the recommendations. It was relatively easy for individuals to agree on what should happen, based on the research and best proactive evidence, but it was a different matter when their departments were required to ‘put their money on the table’.

Relative complexity

All legal and policy changes require governments to review priorities and change organisational structures. Altering one part of the system inevitably puts pressure on other parts and so, not surprisingly, bureaucracies will usually resist change (Sweedler & Stewart 2006). As the Repeat Drink-Driving Program (see Box 16.3) showed, responding to repeat drink-driving required complex legislation, multiple changes in procedures and systems in a number of government departments, and considerable infrastructure support. Furthermore, Sweedler and Stewart (2006) suggest that, even in agencies with a remit to improve public safety, there is often resistance to implementing interlock programs. Given the scope of the drink-driving scheme, it is unsurprising that there has been bureaucratic resistance to it (Repeat Drink-Driving Working Group, unpublished).

Financial factors

Kingdon notes that policy proposals are more likely to survive if they are do-able within financial constraints. In my experience, schemes that are cheaper to implement are not necessarily more likely to be supported by the government. Rather, a scheme is more likely to be supported if is within the budgetary allocation that the policy makers believe is politically defensible in the face of community opinion regarding the seriousness of the problem and the assumed effectiveness of the policy solution. The repeat drink-drivers scheme will cost several million dollars per annum, more than half of which is due to lost revenue from fine deferment, in addition to initial set-up costs.
subject to political cycles and processes. As a result, the intention of the reforms can be lost through the process of laws being drafted or through the subsequent parliamentary review and debate. Whereas administrative changes can evolve in a learn-as-you-go way, responsive to the needs of implementers and promoting a sense of ownership by them, legislative change can build in unforeseen problems and be resisted by bureaucrats, particularly if they have not been successfully consulted and engaged in the process.

Implementation issues

As others have noted about implementing interlock programs:

- good laws are essential, but good implementation is also needed ... simply having the laws on the books is not sufficient ... Strong implementation requires continued commitment from key actors, constant monitoring by advocates and continuous problem solving.

(Sweedler and Stewart 2006, pp. 3–4).

In the case of repeat drink-driving, as a person outside the government I was largely excluded from the design and enactment of the implementation process. My role shifted from collaborating with people inside the government to achieve a shared goal, to influencing the implementation process from outside through media comments and critiques.

The role of policy entrepreneur

Another role that evolved in the drink-driving case was that of the policy broker/advocate who follows the process from its genesis to its implementation, and perhaps beyond to its evaluation (see Roberts 1991). In the drink-driving case, the RDDWG’s executive officer followed the project through its phases, moving fluidly from outside to inside the government and back, as the need arose. There are clear advantages of continuity and clarity of vision in such a role, but people with the skills, experience and access necessary to fulfill it are rare. Ideally, they have the capacity to understand and explain the research evidence, a high level of credibility on the issues and excellent negotiation skills. They are also well networked in and outside the government, have a background in policy development and are able to market themselves to different players as a person of value who can deal with problems and help others to achieve their varied ends. Importantly, and sometimes covertly, policy entrepreneurs need to have a core commitment to the reform project and to the public interest, rather than to the partisan, short-term interests of particular employers or funders. In this regard, they are the antithesis of the ‘hired gun’ advocate. How such a position could be funded and by whom is still being questioned. Roberts (1991) also suggests that the entrepreneur role can be adopted by multiple individuals, which may be more viable.

CONCLUSION

The translation of research into government policy is, for many drug researchers, fascinating but unfamiliar territory. There are risks to getting involved in this work but also great potential benefits; the risks might be lessened by developing a better understanding
of the forces at work. There are many theories of the policy process in the fields of public policy, administration and health, but Kingdon’s multiple-streams model provides useful insights into the process of policy change described in this chapter. While reinforcing the practice of researchers chipping away to accumulate evidence and putting research findings into the public realm during the ‘softening-up phase’, Kingdon’s model also suggests that researchers should be looking to emerging windows of opportunity for policy change. These opportunities typically emerge in the problem and political spheres. Researchers are usually directly involved in collecting data on the size and nature of crug problems but need to track events and possible opportunities in the political realm if they are going to maximise the likelihood of research findings influencing the policy process.

As Kingdon notes, policy windows can emerge for a variety of reasons, but the process is not random and can be facilitated by policy advocates who bring together people and policy ideas. Thus researchers who wish to advocate for evidence-based policy change need to be prepared to feed research results (describing drug problems and viable policy solutions) to those in the political and policy arenas who have the organisational and political capital to turn research findings and policy ideas into policy. This means spending time and resources engaging with those in government to understand their research needs and helping them to devise policy and practice options that are informed by research findings. This can be done by researchers themselves, or by cooperating with other individuals such as policy entrepreneurs, or by identifying existing advocacy organisations that can integrate research findings into the policy process.

Above all else, Kingdon’s model prompts those of us interested in drug policy research to spend more time and energy thinking about bridging the research–policy gap. Kingdon’s model suggests that rather than complaining that policy is rarely influenced by research, we should do what we can to better understand and utilise the policy process. Once research advocates are accepted as legitimate, Kingdon’s account shows that there are practical things that can be done to improve the likelihood that research findings will influence drug policy for the better.