

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Participatory approach in Medicine: A road to take or to avoid?

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In theory, participatory approach is defined as a systemic investigation of a research problem with the collaboration of those affected by the issue under study for purposes of education, and taking action to induce effective social changes (Macaulay 2007). As the center of Participatory Research At McGill (PRAM) has stated, one of the important goals of participatory research is to answer important health related questions that will benefit the partners throughout the research process while developing valid knowledge that is applicable to other settings (Salsberg et al, 2008). The Canadian Institutes of Health Research has also identified participatory research as an integrated knowledge translation plan in which people who should be acting on the results obtained are full partners of the study (Parry et al, 2009). Even though these are clear definitions, what does participatory research mean in practice? Participatory research from the point of view of many scientists is a time consuming method used to justify the usage of “lay” science in research projects. On the other hand, those researchers who conduct participatory research view it as a tool to transmit the knowledge gained throughout their studies to the community that is affected by those results in a very short amount of time. The question that remains to be answered is which one of these two points of view is accurate and valid?

Imagine you are a hiker and you want to climb a mountain to have a view on the city; you are being provided with two options. One of the options is to climb a very high mountain that is filled with many obstacles along the path, but once you reach the summit you would be able to see the most

spectacular view of the city. On the other hand, there is an easier mountain to climb with fewer obstacles in the path. However, the summit only lets you see one small part of the town. Since it would take a shorter time to climb this mountain you will be able to climb many of these type of mountains in the same amount of time needed to climb the high altitude one. Which one would you choose?

As researchers in this busy and fast growing world of science and technology, we tend to choose the easier mountain to climb because it will let us get to the summit in a shorter period of time. In other words, we will be able to get the results faster, and publish as many articles as we can. We do not need to know the people that we are studying, we just have to collect data on them anonymously and make some associations between variables. But along the way, running up to the summit we might miss many opportunities to enjoy the path, and at the end we will get to see only fragmented pictures of the city. Choosing the other mountain to climb can give us a broader perspective of the city sight. It will give us the opportunity to work alongside other people to overcome the obstacles in the path. Nevertheless, the challenge to enter an unknown community, to build relationships with members of the community that are total strangers to researchers, and to gain their trust are barriers not everyone is willing to face. It is not easy to reach consensus on any discussions when 20 people from very different backgrounds comment on every single stage of a project. It is almost impossible to please everyone around a table. It requires effort and energy to maintain rigor research in a mixed environment where scientific facts are as important as non-scientific ones. But yet the best things in life do not come without a struggle.

As academic researchers we have developed expertise in designing and conducting

rigorous science, but we have limited knowledge on the problems different communities are having. These communities can range from a small clinic to a large hospital center or to any geographical community. Regardless of the type of community, community members do not need to read the literature and take scientific courses to understand their problems. They know them by heart, as they live them every single day. Thus, as much as the community needs us researchers to use our statistical, and scientific expertise, we need the community to make us understand the depth and the complexity of their problems. From a practical point of view participatory research is a research approach that allows people who are willing to take actions to make a change in their communities to work alongside academic researchers to achieve their goals.

If we get the opportunity to work with people who are affected by the results of the study, we may see a far more complete picture. The perspectives of these people will be taken into account throughout all phases of the research project. The results of the study do not need to get archived for a long time before being transferred into practice. The results, whether positive or negative, will provide valuable evidence that influence the community immediately. It is only then that we can clearly see the impact of the study on the people and the community. We know that we have reached the summit once we feel we made a difference through time and perseverance, and then we can enjoy the magnificent view of the city. It is now up to us researchers to decide which road to take. But remember that the spectacular view at the end of the road is worth the time and effort that is needed to climb the mountain.

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