

AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE TO PUTTING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

5. Action research

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Action research is a relatively informal, but potentially extremely useful, research technique, which has been used infrequently in podiatry to date. It is a process that neatly links day-to-day actions with research, and allows change and understanding to be undertaken at the same time. As such, it should have great relevance at the point of delivery of a service and should be of genuine practical value.

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A number of definitions have been produced for action research as follows:

- 'A form of self-reflective enquiry by participants, undertaken in order to improve understanding of their practices in context with a view to maximising social justice'.¹
- 'Action research is a process by which change and understanding can be pursued at the one time'.²
- 'Action research is a research paradigm which allows you to develop knowledge or understanding as part of practice'.³

All the definitions have the components of a task, action or change process, and reflection or understanding. Simply put, the process is a quest for knowledge on how to improve.

Importantly, action research is a cyclical process for which a model of understanding has been produced. This model has four main components:

Reflect	Plan
Observe	Act

This is however a spiral rather than a cyclical process, because as one cycle of action research has been completed, improved understanding then leads to

further planning and action, and so on. Although this is the full action research model, this model can be simplified, as follows:

Action
Critical reflection

So the process is one of an action, followed by reflection, and as such is a very natural one. The reflection period covers considerations such as how well did the action go — what was good, not so good, what has been learned from the experience, how could it have been done better, and so on. This then leads to improved understanding, with conclusions being derived from the exercise, and, from this, plans for further actions can be prepared and undertaken.

Many people would suggest that they already work in this way. The difference however lies in the rigour with which the planning and especially the reflection are approached. With action research, frequent in-depth critical assessment should take place, with special attention to aspects of the action that may have produced unexpected results.

There is more systematic collection of evidence in action research, and problems

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are posed and considered in addition to dealing with those that are there to be solved. The process also requires collaboration – it is not research that is simply ‘done to other people’, but instead, is an approach that requires active participation from the ‘researcher’ with genuine participation from all involved.

HISTORY

Action research was founded in 1948 by Kurt Lewin – an American social psychologist and educator.⁴ The term was used to describe work that did not separate research investigations from the action needed to solve a problem. Lewin believed that research should be used practically in the real world and not simply be undertaken as a theoretical academic exercise. This followed a belief expressed earlier by Karl Marx in 1845 that the world should not simply be understood and interpreted, but instead, the purpose of research should be to change that world.⁵

One of the first people to use action research was Stephen Correy at a teachers’ college in the United States.⁶ He saw that action research had greater value in the change it brought directly into personal practice than in generalisation as seen in other forms of research. Correy also noted that collaboration was essential in the action research process.

In the 1950s, however, action research was attacked widely as being unscientific, and quantitative research methodologies predominated. Much later, in the 1970s, educationalists noted that quantitative experiments were of little relevance to their own day-to-day work and quite simply incapable of solving their own particular issues and problems. Action research again emerged in teaching and was seen as being useful in that setting. Through this interest, action research was widely adopted by the teaching profession and many different uses were defined for this approach.

STRENGTHS

Action research has a number of strengths. Firstly, it is simple to perform; it is not a complex esoteric research method requiring statistical knowledge or complex qualitative language. It is a development of a natural process, and anyone can do it. A prior research design is not needed and the process can be worked out as the research proceeds.

The method is less likely to fail as a research approach through offering a high degree of flexibility in implementation. It is also cost-effective and practical to perform and will not require vast amounts of research funding to be implemented, but instead can simply be performed as a

series of workplace-based meetings with follow-up tasks.

In addition, as a natural everyday process, the approach may not require ethical approval (but this will be worthwhile checking with local research advisers depending on the proposal to be considered). In the past, I have taken some action research projects to ethical committees, to be told by some that they didn’t really think that ethical approval was needed and by others that they agreed that ethical approval was required. For other studies, the general opinion has been that a ‘project’ was being undertaken, not research.

The reality is that much of the teaching profession routinely uses action research for CPD, and, under the new ethical arrangements, ethics committees would not be able to cope with requests for ethical approval to the level that would be required. If there is any doubt whatsoever, the advice would be to seek approval.

Secondly, action research is a tool for change. As such, it overcomes the perceived persistent failure of research to impact on, or improve, practice. This is one of the main purposes of action research and part of its philosophical underpinnings. As such, it focuses on issues pertinent to the researcher and is also therefore directly relevant to the workplace. In turn, it will bring potential improvement for an organisation.

Thirdly, action research has strong communication benefits. It not only bridges the gap between management and workers through direct involvement, but can also bridge similar or even wider gaps between organisations and patients. Communication benefits can also include networking communications in addition to those in the immediate workplace.

Finally, action research is a learning process for all involved. The critical reflection involved allows many opportunities to remedy problems or errors, and any prior assumptions in the area in question are tested in action. The improved knowledge gained allows opportunity for self-reflection, which in turn brings improvements in self-awareness. Throughout a number of action research projects, I have yet to do one where the participants including myself haven’t learned much from the process.

CRITICISMS/LIMITATIONS

All is not perfect, however, and there are a number of limitations to action research, which need to be understood by those planning to use the techniques.

Unlike other research methods, action research is often of value to the researcher and his or her work environment alone,

with the findings not necessarily being generalisable beyond the immediate setting. This does not always follow – sometimes the findings can be generalisable, either in terms of theory, or, less frequently, of data, but it is important to realise that this may not be the case.

Action research can require much time and energy - more so than simply going to work and back. In this case, it is important to keep one’s feet on the ground and not become over-ambitious in what changes are attempted through the process. This can also be compounded by a general resistance to change, which, if present, can hamper the researchers’ efforts in terms of gaining access to files, other data, and clinics for observation.

Importantly, action research is not seen as ‘real research’ by some authorities (even qualitative research authorities who have fended off criticisms of their own research approaches from the quantitative research camp over the years). While the criticisms of the 1950s have been mainly refuted, it has been said that there remains a problem of ‘data, which can make no claim to be generally representative’.⁷ In other words, the field of action research shows how to collect the data, but not how that data could, or should, be handled.

In the strictest sense, the public should be able to judge the value of a study, not just the individual alone, to confirm its validity. The recommendation would be that if such work is believed to be mainly of relevance to the researcher and their team alone, then findings that are meaningful and therefore useful to the researcher could be discussed with colleagues, mentors, patients or focus groups, or written up as a case study exercise for *Podiatry Now* as a validity check.

WHY ACTION RESEARCH IS USEFUL TO PODIATRISTS

Action research should be useful to podiatry in many respects. The following areas are those for which action research approaches could be potentially useful, but this list is by no means comprehensive.

Podiatry education and development

Podiatry is experiencing many developmental changes at present, and practitioners are having to learn new concepts and translate these into clinical practice for the first time. An action research approach can help with this process. Similarly, in teaching, action research has been used for CPD purposes for many years, and there would be a CPD value for the reflective podiatrist undertaking personal action research to enhance personal development.

Management

Action research could have wide value in podiatry. The NHS is in a process of change, and change management facilitation is one of the main values of action research. Not only could it be used to initiate change, but also to gain ownership and agreement of required changes in order to smooth the change as it takes place. It could also be used by podiatrists for personal evaluation for annual appraisal and self-monitoring purposes.

Research

Finally, it must not be forgotten that action research is also a research technique and as such could be useful to podiatry departments who wish to undertake research for a variety of reasons.

HOW TO GO ABOUT ACTION RESEARCH

How do you go about undertaking action research when you may have had little involvement in research of any type? Here are a few suggestions.

Implementation

- Put a small group together and learn through actually doing action research.

- Start with a short-term simple project before taking on more complex issues.
- Organise the group to work to a realistic, but efficient time schedule
- Build reflection/discussion time into the planned group activity
- Where necessary, include those involved in the action (certainly staff, can also be patients)
- Consensus research techniques can be a useful method to utilise in an action research approach, so for the first time researcher, these are best avoided initially

Group activity

- Take care with the group dynamics - it is important not to be intolerant with the group members - the group will only work well in a relaxed atmosphere.
- Monitor the activity throughout the work and keep detailed notes.
- Keep a constant check that the project is improving you in line with your personal values.
- Flexibility of approach is essential

Considerations over questions asked in action research

- Questions asked during the research should be complex (Not simply yes/no answers)
- Questions should be based in simple language
- Questions should be concise
- Questions should be meaningful
- Questions should not already have an answer.
- The questions should be those over which the researcher has an influence

Data gathering sources

- Interviews, Journals, Records, Portfolios, Checklists, Project information, Diaries, Questionnaires, Self assessment, Field notes, Individual Files, Meeting logs, Tapes, Anecdotal records, Memos, Photos, Videos, Case studies, Survey Focus Groups
- Data should be the most appropriate, easy to collect, accessible, at least two sources used – for triangulation purposes.

Interpretation

- Organise data into trends and themes.
- Use collected data and current literature to plan the course of action of the research.

Evaluate the results

When evaluating the results of the change implemented, consider:

- Has an improvement occurred?
- Does data evidence support/show the improvement?
- If not, what changes could show better results?

Continue from the findings

This is the spiral of action research, which can continue as long as the researcher is interested or able to.

Example

An example to work through could be as follows:

'Research question: In a really busy clinic setting, what can I do to ensure that high-priority patients can still get appointments at short notice?'

In addressing the question posed, the following action research approach may take place:

Reflect: Is this a problem at the moment and how do I know? (Look at/keep clinic data to monitor? Is this a potential problem?) How is the diary kept at present? Is there anything in the literature to suggest better or different systems?

Plan: Put a small group together: Brainstorm to prepare and consider the options for change. Agree the most viable option. Discuss and agree the process of implementation.

Act: Implement and communicate the change, following the agreed plan. Observe: What happens? What changes have occurred? Does it work? What are the problems? What do the patients think about the change?

Reflect: What benefits have resulted? How could this have been done better? What was learned from the experience? Was this worth doing, or were things better before? How do we know that this was an improvement? How do the findings compare with the

literature? What else needs doing that is related? How could this best be followed up? Write up the conclusions.

USEFUL RESOURCES

There are many resources available for those interested in undertaking action research.

Two particularly useful ones are:

1. Cohen L, Manion L, Morrison K, *Research Methods in Education*, 5th Edition. London: Routledge/Falmer, 2000.

This publication contains an excellent Chapter on an overview of action research and is useful in giving the reader a basic working knowledge of its approaches.

2. Action Research Resources www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html.

This website is maintained by Bob Dick. It contains information and links on relevant journals, courses, other action research websites, mailing lists, Action Research Institutes, papers, dissertations, work in progress and conference abstracts. It is a substantial website and useful to both those new to action research and also those who have wide experience of the process.

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