# Evidence and healthy public policy: Multiple sciences, multiple frameworks

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**Patrick Fafard**

Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa

www.uOttawa.ca

Why do governments seem to ignore scientific evidence when making policy decisions?

OR

Why knowledge transfer is not enough.

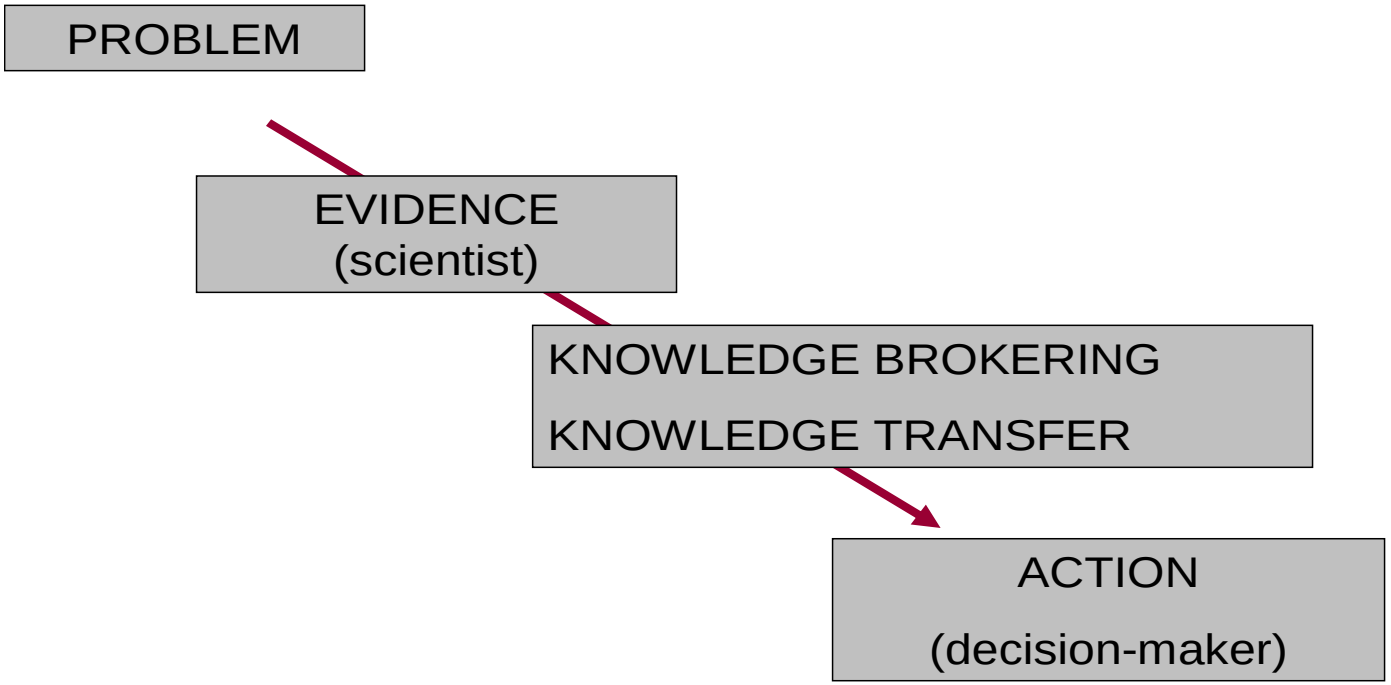
"There is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult."

(Attributed to John Maynard Keynes)

# Five Propositions

- Drawn from contemporary political science.
- Increasingly challenging to the standard notions of evidence and action in the health sciences.

# The health sciences standard model

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# 1. Scientific evidence is perhaps most influential on discrete program choices.

- Policy choices are not the same as program choices.
- (Some) program choices:
  - Are roughly analogous to clinical decisions
  - Are small enough to involve a small circle of people willing and able to follow the best available evidence (e.g., What types of warning deter smoking?)

# 2. Research and knowledge transfer are critical but not the whole story.

- A sophisticated understanding of "what works" with respect to knowledge transfer (KT):
  - how to get research evidence into the hands of "decision-makers" and "policy-makers".
- Enhance our models of KT:
  - Define more precisely key concepts like "decision", "policy"; "policy maker"; and "decision maker".
- Even with the best KT not all policy decisions will be based on the best available evidence.

# 3. The role of scientific evidence varies depending on the stage of the policy making process.

(1) agenda setting

(2) formulation

(3) decision-making

(4) implementation

(5) evaluation

- Decision-making is one stage among many
- Different kinds of evidence are critical at different stages of the model
  - Should the government regulate tobacco advertising?
  - What is the best way to limit tobacco advertising?

# 4. Relationship between evidence and policy depends on the dominant (advocacy) coalition of interests.

- Policy making is driven by competing and multiple accounts of the nature of policy problems and by the political clout of advocacy coalitions
- Researchers can be key members of advocacy coalitions or their research is appropriated by coalitions
  - e.g., for and against banning trans fats

# 5. Evidence is socially constructed. / Policy is about "frames", "discourse", conversation and dialogue.

- The job of the policy analyst is to:
  - Understand the competing ways issues are framed
    - Obesity as an individual or community challenge
  - Facilitate dialogue between participants
  - Recognize that there are many truths that inform public policy

- The "new public health"

"Social science does contribute to policy and practice but the link is neither consensual, graceful nor self-evident."

Martin Rein, Social science and public policy.
New York: Penguin 1976: 272.

# Thank you! / Merci!

- Patrick Fafard, "Evidence and Healthy Public Policy: Insights from Health and Political Sciences" National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy, June 2008.
  http://www.ncchpp.ca/en/listeresumes.aspx?sortcode=2.1.1&id_article=202&starting=&ending=

# Patrick Fafard

Assistant Professor
Graduate School of Public and International Affairs
University of Ottawa
Desmarais Hall, Room 11-105
55 Laurier Avenue East
Ottawa, Canada, K1N 6N5

Email: pfafard@uottawa.ca