

Public Health – Interview with Medha Kumar

Transcript

Deb: I'm Deborah Gleeson, a Senior Lecturer in Public Health at La Trobe University. And I'd like to introduce Medha Kumar, who's a former Master of Public Health student from La Trobe University. Medha did a policy-focused research project for her Master of Public Health. And she now works at Comcare, which is an Australian Government agency responsible for workplace health and safety. So I've invited Medha along today to talk to you a little bit about her MPH research, about what she learned from the policy subjects that she did at La Trobe, and about the policy aspects of her current work role.

Deb: So thank you very much Medha for joining us today. And let's start by talking about your MPH project. What was the issue that you focused on in your project?

Medha: Thanks Deb. So we started with the health problem which was a focus on the global burden of diet related NCDs (non-communicable diseases). And then we specifically focused in on nutrition labelling policy and laws, particularly the debate around front-of-pack labelling. We initially looked at the global context and then brought it right back to the national conversation in this area. The study itself focused on how nutrition labelling policies are made. So we used a case study of the Australian development of the Health Star Rating system to explore those issues and also look at what insights could be drawn for the global context.

Deb: And that was one of the first studies of the Health Star Rating system, wasn't it?

Medha: That's right.

Deb: Right in the early days of implementing that system.

Medha: Absolutely. Yes, so there wasn't any other study at the time looking at the policy process that was undertaken.

Deb: What was the main theory that you used in your research? And can you tell us a little bit about why you chose that particular theory?

Medha: Sure. We first looked at the literature around global health policy and then we looked at policy frameworks that would allow us to examine how policies are made, how issues reach the policy agenda and how key actors can really shape the policy process. So we landed on Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) as it was most relevant to the findings. And this framework has 5 key elements. It talks about the problem, policy and political streams. It describes a policy launch window, which is when these three streams converge and there is opportunity for new policy to form. And it describes Policy entrepreneurs whose role it really is to facilitate the convergence of the three policy streams.

Deb: Very interesting. And what were the main findings of your research?

Medha: We had three key findings. The first was around the importance of the Policy entrepreneur and in the Australian case study we particularly described the leadership shown by senior government bureaucrats. The second finding was around the influence of the industry groups, and as we know in nutrition labelling policy the food industries are very significant interest group. In this

example we also described then the very significant role the public health and consumer advocacy groups played. And lastly, we discussed the complexities of nutrition labelling policy in the global environment and particularly focused on the lack of leadership and also lack of transparency and how the interest groups are engaged with in the global context.

Deb: So very useful in terms of highlighting what it was that led to a successful launch of the Health Star Rating program and really drawing out what some of those lessons were that could be helpful in the global context.

So what did you do to make sure that your research findings were available to other people? Because it's such a topical and important issue.

Medha: Yes, absolutely. We published the research in an international journal, the Nutrition and Dietetics Journal. So that meant we had a much broader reach in our audience. The article was subsequently picked up by other papers and it has more recently been cited in the World Cancer Research Fund Report. So that's a report that was developed for policy makers that are interested in implementing front-of-pack labelling in their own countries. So like you said it shows probably how this continues to be a topical subject. And that countries are looking to the Australian example to understand how we've advanced and progressed in this debate but potentially how we could advance further as well.

Deb: Well done, Medha. You really turned your learning experience in your Masters into something was obviously very useful for not just even policy makers in Australia but also in other countries.

Medha: Yes, and we're very proud of it.

Deb: Excellent. So let's talk now a little bit about why you did the Master of Public Health and what you took away from the policy subjects that you undertook during your Masters. So first of all, what motivated you to do the MPH in the first place?

Medha: To be honest, it was probably a bit of a chance occurrence as to how I ended up doing further study let alone the MPH. So I was a physiotherapist in clinical practice looking for a career transition, and was feeling quite lost. And at a similar time, a friend asked me to accompany them to an MPH open day. They had a very clear career path in mind. And I remember when I just attended the open day I was really interested by the variety of the subjects. I was lucky enough to get in to La Trobe University then.

And then while I was doing the MPH, my motivation again just wasn't driven by having a clear career path or a goal. My approach was really to expose myself to as many subjects as possible, learn as much as I could, be open to where my interests would lie and then look at how that could shape my career and I think that's been a really effective approach for me.

Deb: Really interesting. So what were some of the main learnings you took away from the MPH – and particularly from the policy subjects that you took during your studies?

Medha: I took a lot of knowledge and skills from the MPH but I'll focus on the policy and the research. In terms of the subject, I think it gave me some quite solid skills in how to undertake policy analysis and consider the broader implications of a policy, it gave me a better appreciation of the governance framework and requirements, particularly as I work in government, and also how to position the evidence in for example ministerial briefs or to influence my stakeholders. So very specific writing skills.

In terms of the research, I think that really highlighted to me how the policy process can be a lot more interesting and challenging than developing the policy content itself. And again, just

appreciating how much you need to understand your stakeholders, what their motivations are, their agendas, their level of influence and power, I think is quite critical in the kind of work I do at the moment.

Deb: Right, so on that note can you tell us a little bit about the current position that you have at Comcare?

Medha: Yes. So my role is Assistant Director in the Strategic Programs team, which is part of our research and innovation business group. I've had previous roles in both policy and project management and again all of these roles have been really well supported by the MPH.

So, yes it's been really great to know that I can put that theoretical knowledge into a very practical kind of experience, and also great to reflect on how I have been able to use the MPH to benefit my career and shape my career path, which I was earlier on not that clear on.

Deb: Right. Yes, and I think that would be a similar experience for a lot of students, particularly those who come from clinical backgrounds and want to move in to a different type of work but aren't really sure what that involves or how to get there. So I think that's a very interesting story for our students. And very interesting in terms of how much you've been able to draw on what you've learned in the Master of Public Health to inform your approach in your work and to shape your career.

Medha: Yes, it's been absolutely invaluable, undertaking the course.

Deb: Is there anything else that you would want to tell the students about while you've got this opportunity, Medha?

Medha: I highly recommend undertaking the research project and doing a minor thesis. It's the opportunity you have to work closely with someone and have them really supervise your work and provide you feedback. And that's where you can really learn how to solidify and improve your writing skills and analytical skills. And the subject itself, policy, is implemented in so many different workplaces and environments. So getting that basic understanding is really beneficial.

Deb: Well thank you very much Medha for giving up your time. I know you are a very busy person, so thank you for coming along today and sharing those insights with us.

Medha: Thanks Deb.