Influencing health policy through public deliberation: Lessons learned from two decades of Citizens’/community juries

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1. Introduction

Public engagement is the process through which stakeholders and publics can contribute to discussions, and influence policy decisions and actions that affect them (Rowe and Frewer, 2005). Engaging different publics on health policy questions is attractive to decision-makers because people’s values and beliefs are often central to healthcare debates (Abelson et al., 2012). There are a number of models and methods currently being used, with differing levels of opportunity for the public to contribute to decision-making processes (Mitton et al., 2009; Rowe and Frewer, 2005). Citizens'/community juries [CJs] are an increasingly prominent approach to public engagement that aims to elicit the perspectives and preferences of groups of people who have been educated about, and given time to discuss, how to address a specific policy problem (Dryzek, 2000; Street et al., 2014). Because CJs emphasize the importance of listening to divergent views and facilitating public deliberation, CJs are appropriate for engaging members of the public in developing solutions to controversial health policy problems that require the consideration of both values and evidence (Abelson et al., 2012; Rychetnik et al., 2013).

The emergence of CJs as a form of policy engagement is part of the ‘deliberative turn’ in governance, in which those with power seek to step beyond mere consultation by creating active roles for the public within decision-making processes (Barnes et al., 2007; Dryzek, 2000). Formal deliberation is more than a dialogue and not just a debate. In theory, at least, the deliberative process extends the thinking of participants beyond their own interests to think about public goods and the collective needs of the community: the aim is to generate recommendations or other advice on a defined topic (Carson, 2008; Solomon and Abelson, 2012). Health policy researchers have adapted jury methods in a variety of ways (Street et al., 2014), and the increasing use of CJs on health policy issues might suggest an increasing appetite amongst policymakers for this type of ‘publicly’ generated evidence (Davies et al., 2006). Paradoxically, however, many CJs are not directly connected to policy processes, few are subsequently evaluated, and the vast
need to carefully consider the following four questions:

- Which policymakers are prepared to change policy settings, and are working under a regime that will allow change to occur?
- Whether the broader community is open, or able to be convinced to be open, to alternative agendas and new ideas.

Even if both of these conditions are met, the impact of a deliberative exercise on policy itself is tied partly to the extent to which policy actors are willing to endorse and legitimize the process and its outcomes (Hendriks, 2005). Common objections and concerns about the value of the evidence produced through public engagement exercises include the representativeness of the jury's findings (how can small groups of people represent the views and interests of the broader public); and the authenticity of jurors' decisions (how can lay-people possess sufficient expertise to understand, articulate, and form meaningful judgements on all of the relevant issues) (Irwin et al., 2013). Objections can also be raised as to how the jury participants were selected; whether the question or ‘charge’ considered by the jury was framed, the extent to which a fair hearing was given to all sides of the debate, which particular experts, perspectives and forms of evidence were presented to the jury, and whether this information was too complex or too superficial to allow jurors to answer the charge in a manner that is consistent with their beliefs and values. Objections and concerns about the representativeness or authenticity of a specific CJ will raise questions about the legitimacy and democratic credibility of the or exercise (Martin, 2008a). The key message then is that those considering organising a CJ to explore public perspectives on a health problem should make a decision whether their aims are primarily research or policy driven. CJs are a legitimate means of achieving either (sometimes simultaneously), but if the ultimate goal is policy relevance, it may be better to collaborate with decision makers at the outset, rather than seeking to ‘translate’ the findings of an already-completed jury process. If the intention is to influence policy then it is also important to realize that politics in the broadest sense of the term is