General discussion

The discussion period focused on the merits of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in generating robust evidence for policy development, and examples where other forms of evidence might be more useful.

RCTs as a 'gold standard'?

A number of roundtable participants questioned how widely randomised trials could be used, and asked whether they deserved their 'gold standard' status or superiority in the evidence hierarchy, arguing that RCTs:

- are not useful for answering some types of policy questions (for example, monetary policy or climate change policies are not amenable to randomisation)
- can be costly and politically challenging
- may not necessarily provide an unbiased estimate of a policy's effects — the design of the trial might have been poor, subjects might drop out or original random assignment could be compromised by subjects' behaviour
- the trial may not necessarily replicate the conditions of a full-scale rollout of the policy — for example a high-quality administrative team might be used for the trial.

Andrew Leigh, Jeffrey Smith and Sally Green acknowledged that randomised trials are not a panacea ('trials are not a substitute for thinking'), but they argued that they can be a powerful tool with unique potential to avoid selection bias. Andrew Leigh argued they had particular potential in illuminating a large range of social policy questions, particularly in areas such as education, crime and income support.

Patricia Rogers reminded the roundtable that randomised trials share many of the same potential problems that other empirical studies have (such as attrition bias), and some RCTs have been poorly designed or implemented. Sally Green noted that one of the improvements secured through the CONSORT Statement, was better journal reporting of the common biases within trials.

Andrew Leigh argued that Australia is in 'no danger of over-relying on randomised trials', or blindly accepting them as the only method of evaluation. To date, Australian governments have undertaken only a handful of randomised policy trials.

On balance, speakers concluded Australian governments should do more randomised trials, but in conjunction with other forms of evidence. Even where RCTs could make a powerful contribution, there would often be a need for other forms of evidence to address interest in scaling effects, or general equilibrium effects.

Getting relevant, quality evidence at the right time

A participant asked how research organisations could best meet the challenge of engaging with policymakers to ensure they are producing the right type of evidence at the right time. Sally Green indicated that initially the Cochrane Collaboration did not really engage policymakers to help set the research agenda, as it was a volunteer organisation that relied on volunteers undertaking systematic reviews, usually on topics of their interest and expertise. The result was that a lot of reviews were undertaken at a little financial cost, but there were some big gaps in terms of coverage. For example, many volunteers did reviews on pregnancy and childbirth, but far fewer on heart disease. As the organisation has matured, the Collaboration has devoted a significant effort to engaging policymakers and practitioners to help set the research agenda and prioritise reviews by asking policymakers what sorts of questions they would like to see answered.

One participant noted that although there are good examples of research evidence developing into a compelling narrative for policymakers, there was an equal number of cases where it had not. This was especially so in an environment where a 'single bottom line' is important, with research often complex and cloaked in qualifications and caveats. Sally Green argued that it was particularly important for the research community to ensure their results are correctly communicated to policymakers and the public. A number of research bodies are currently studying the best ways to communicate results, including by looking at how people can best understand uncertainty and complex 'decision trees'.