

Title: Strengthening health service research: Hearing the voices

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This paper provides an overview of the role of research in health services. It identifies both the benefits of quantitative and qualitative paradigms to inform health policy and service delivery, but pays particular attention to the important trend to conduct qualitative studies to 'hear' and be informed by the first hand accounts of health providers, administrators, policy makers and consumers. The paper maps out the assumptions behind qualitative research, and then discusses why such research is important to inform policy development and evaluations of services. It provides examples from the published literature to highlight how research can provide evidence to support, challenge or promote change in health service delivery and policy directions. Understanding the contradictions between what policy formally aims to achieve, what it does achieve in practice and how people experience the impact of the intended policy will be discussed.