

Networking

A novel approach to research presentations for networks: an evaluation of Visual Presentation with Expert Review (ViPER)

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Introduction

Primary care research networks have a broad remit which includes stimulating an interest in research, training practitioners in research skills, disseminating research findings and encouraging a critical evidence-based approach to practice (Mant, 1997). Since 1994, the Wessex Primary Care Research Network (WReN) has held an annual meeting for its members to present their research endeavours to each other. Initially, participants either made a 10-minute oral presentation (followed by 5 minutes for questions) or displayed a poster. After three conferences, we began to question the suitability of these conventional methods of presentation at our meetings. Although no formal evaluation has ever been conducted, posters and short oral presentations appear to be effective when the aim is to disseminate recent results to experienced academic researchers. However, a conference for practice-based novice researchers has more complex aims. These include the provision of a supportive environment for practitioners to present their own research and receive expert advice and constructive feedback, as well as assisting the audience in improving their research competencies.

With these goals in mind, we have developed a novel presentation format that increases the opportunities for active engagement in discussion. Our method consists of a poster presentation and brief oral presentation followed by 20 minutes of facili-

tated group discussion with input from an expert in the field. We call this Visual Presentation with Expert Review (ViPER).

Evaluation of ViPERs

Abstracts were first presented in ViPER format at our 1998 conference. Four presenters were invited to present a ViPER and were asked to prepare:

- 1) a poster describing their research;
- 2) a 5-minute presentation using three overheads, summarizing key points and highlighting the particular areas in which they welcomed help from the expert and audience.

Information about the ViPER format was included in the conference registration details and the programme. Participants were encouraged to view the posters and select the ViPER presentation that was most relevant to their interests.

A formal evaluation was conducted to ensure that the ViPER achieved its intended educational objectives both for participants and for presenters. Given the limited resources, the evaluation focused on reaction and learning rather than on resultant behaviour (Hutchinson, 1999). Data was collected by the following methods:

- *direct observation* – observers made contemporaneous notes of the setting and the behaviour of and interactions between the presenter, expert and participants. They also looked for any unexpected constraints or difficulties;
- *Participant questionnaires* – on exiting the ViPER, all participants were asked to comment

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on their learning experience and to rate ViPERs as a presentation form on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 = no value, and 10 = maximum value). The conference evaluation form, which was distributed at the end of the day, asked participants to indicate their preferred format for learning about research (i.e., poster, short oral presentation or ViPER);

- *telephone interview* – each presenter, each expert and a sample of participants were interviewed. To obtain the greatest diversity of participant opinion, we sampled six high and six low scorers from the participant questionnaire.

Findings

Value to participants

Immediate feedback was enthusiastic, with high ratings of perceived value (mean 7.5, mode 8, range 3–10) ($n = 54$). In total, 94% (32/34) of participants who completed a conference evaluation form indicated that ViPERs were their preferred format for learning about research, as opposed to more conventional methods.

Viewing of the posters helped participants to select the ViPER most relevant to their interests, and enhanced their understanding of the topic and their readiness to ask questions.

It was good to know what the ViPER was about and have a chance to think about some of the issues prior to the session.

Valuable because it allows you to absorb more information as the researcher presented.

Very useful in preparing ideas to share with presenter.

It was considered to be very important to have read the poster first, and those who, because of limited time or unfamiliarity with the ViPER format, had not read the poster recognized that they were at a disadvantage. Suggestions for future ViPERs included clearer instructions for participants, the allocation of dedicated poster-viewing time within the programme, and handouts of the poster.

The short oral presentations provided participants with ‘an essential synopsis’ and ‘focused attention on key points’. The questions posed by

the presenter in the concluding remarks provided the jumping-off point for the subsequent discussion.

I learnt from the contributions made in the discussion.

Helpful for ideas on conducting research, as many of the comments are transferable.

Even those who did not contribute actively to the discussion reported benefit.

I have a better understanding of how to look at evidence-based practice. Made me think. I didn’t contribute, but I listened hard.

Useful. Did not participate, but would have been comfortable doing so. This was my first WReN meeting. It was unthreatening and I was reassured and would consider presentation myself.

The presenters’ perspective

Presenters liked the ViPER format because it was more interactive than conventional oral presentations, with plenty of time for discussion and questions. Presenters found the discussion helpful, as it provided ‘constructive’ and ‘good sensible’ input, with ‘hints and ideas’. It helped to ‘raise the study profile’ and ‘opened doors with potential collaborators’. Presenters commented that this presentation style was particularly valuable when research was in the planning or data-interpretation phase.

The experts’ experiences

The experts perceived added benefits of ViPER presentation for the presenter, including the following.

Opportunity to share ideas not fully worked out.

Vigorous discussion about subject matter in informal group setting... wouldn’t have happened in formal presentation.

For participants, the experts felt that the ViPER format changed the balance of the meeting and enabled ‘everyone to chip in’ and ‘exchange ideas’.

The experts found their role unexpectedly complex. In addition to the provision of advice, they found themselves, like teachers, involved in the

provision of an environment that was conducive to learning, the monitoring of the learners' progress, the provision of constructive feedback, and intervening appropriately in order to facilitate the learning. We debated the advantages of assigning separate individuals to the roles of expert, facilitator and chair. As this would increase the size of the group, threatening its intimacy and cohesiveness, we have stayed with the model of an expert reviewer alone, but we now brief them more thoroughly about their roles.

Conclusion

The formal evaluation exercise helped to confirm the benefits of this format for research presentation

whilst highlighting organizational issues that have enabled us subsequently to refine the ViPER. We would recommend the use of ViPERs at any conference or research day where the goals include the acquisition of research skills by both presenters and participants.

References

- Hutchinson, L.** 1999: Evaluating and researching the effectiveness of educational interventions. *British Medical Journal* 318, 1267–69.
- Mant, D.** 1997: *R&D in primary care: NHSE National Working Group Report*. Leeds: Department of Health.

Networking page submissions

If you are part of a Primary Health Care Research Network, or if you would like to comment on such networks, you are encouraged to submit a commentary of up to 300–400 words to Dr Karin Friedli at the address below. Longer pieces on other networking topics may also be considered in consultation with the co-ordinator.

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