

## Webinar 1: An introduction to sustainability

AH-TRIP stands for allied health translating research into practice. Understanding sustainability is one of the significant implementation challenges. Unfortunately, we don't have a recipe that says if you implement in this way OR use particular implementation strategies then the outcomes of your TRIP project is guaranteed to be sustained in usual practice.

We know that sustainability is the ultimate goal of health service change, but what does it mean?

There are five key constructs of successful sustainability <sup>(1)</sup>:

- 1) after a defined period of time;
- 2) the program, clinical intervention and or implementation strategies continue to be delivered; and/or
- 3) individual behaviour change is maintained;
- 4) the program and individual behaviour change may evolve or adapt; while
- 5) continuing to produce benefits for individuals/systems

There is a common view that you should think about sustainability as your project is coming to an end, however our experts agree that it is important to consider sustainability at multiple time points throughout your change process. When considering your context, the people involved, the evidence and the practice change itself, it's important to think about what structures, skills, resources, leadership and commitment are involved both during implementation and what might be needed ongoing. This is why we say slow down in the early stages of your TRIP approach particularly when you are identifying and understanding your clinical problem to ensure you the practice change is going to have the best chance of continuing.

The 5 key constructs of sustainability highlights that the change may need to evolve or adapt, and this is an integral part of sustainability. We work in complex health systems that are constantly evolving and changing therefore our implementation efforts need to continue to evolve within this broader adaptation.

Let's use an example; I implemented an engagement strategy on a ward this included a volunteer that engaged targeted patient groups in meaningful activity to prevent delirium → this strategy worked brilliantly until the MDT team rotated, as we hadn't prepared for the change in context and ownership/handover didn't really occur. You can probably think of a range of other changes in the context that could have threatened the sustainability of this volunteer led engagement strategy:- government directive that all volunteers need to have



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a certain level of training to be able to work with patients, change in hospital priorities meaning that the volunteer time needs to be redirected elsewhere, or increased complexity of patients meaning that there were fewer patients appropriate for the volunteer to work with or a simple change in infection control procedures are important contextual factors to consider.

Simple change affecting only one group or one process might be a little easier to sustain whereas sustainability of complex interventions involving multiple groups or processes may be more difficult and require ongoing active facilitation as the context, the people involved and evidence change. “*Sustainability is the process of managing and supporting the evolution of an intervention within a changing context*”<sup>(2)</sup>. The evidence suggests that continuing leadership, alignment with organisational goals, monitoring and program visibility are all important factors in sustainability.

Our experts have some key points

- Get the right people involved. Consider your stakeholders and communicate with them throughout your implementation. Continuing leadership is important for sustainability, so while you may spend lots of time with local champions during implementation you may also need to keep local and organizational leaders engaged in decision making and helping ensure your successful outcomes are visible in the organisation. Consumers can also be a powerful advocate and provide visibility beyond your organisation. Have systems to engage new team members as you will find attrition in your original champions
- Plan for sustainability from the start; integrate new processes and roles into existing routines and structures (“program” not “project” mode)
- Set up processes to monitor, report and reflect on performance using relevant process and/or outcome measures, and decide in advance what adaptations and/or slippage are acceptable. You may need to plan processes to reinvigorate or refresh your intervention, keep it aligned with organizational priorities, or even replace it if new evidence comes to hand.

There are some sustainability frameworks and theories that can assist you to think about these concepts in a structured way particularly if you are approaching a complex intervention – have a look at our other resources if you are interested in more detail and as always get support from an experienced mentor particularly if you are new to this.

References:

1. Moore J., Mascarenhas A., Bain., Straus S. Developing a comprehensive definition of sustainability, 2017. Implementation Science 12, 110 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13012-017-0637-1>
2. Chambers D., Glasgow R., Stange K. The dynamic sustainability framework: addressing the paradox of sustainment amid ongoing change, 2013. Implementation Science 8, 117 <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-8-117>