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Developing defensible evaluation techniques in the human services sector: A methodology and generic evaluation framework for the not-for-profit sector.

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The Human Services Sector in Australia is not renowned for the standard and quality of its approach to evaluation. This is in part due to the fact that in recent years government has increasingly transferred the responsibility of human service delivery from the public sector to the not-for-profit sector. Transfer of responsibility and the associated risks is often not matched by sufficient resources to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of delivering community and client-based outcomes through this sector. In addition, the not-for-profit sector itself is often so involved and committed to service delivery that it has neither the skills nor the time or resources to prepare for or undertake meaningful evaluations. These developments highlight the need for the development of simple but effective evaluation techniques for this sector.

Where the sector has seen developments in evaluation protocols, there are wide and substantively different approaches – usually predominated by qualitative methods. When quantitative methods have emerged, there are many contending models, methodologies and survey instruments each purporting to measure program success or the achievement of program outcomes.

This paper explains the key dilemmas being faced by evaluators in the not-for-profit sector and supplements this with case studies of the development of evaluation and evaluation frameworks specifically linked to the field of suicidology.

The paper addresses the general trend in human services and in suicidology in particular for research and evaluation to be largely based on anecdotal evidence, qualitative methods and expert narrative rather than disciplined evaluation techniques. It outlines how a structured evaluation framework was designed and implemented in the area of suicide bereavement. It shows how the specific evaluation tools were developed through the active engagement of people bereaved by suicide and refined to create a suite of defensible evaluation techniques and instruments applicable across the human services sector.

The paper concludes with an outline of a transferable methodology for developing evaluation frameworks in the not-for-profit sector and includes a proposed evaluation framework that can be generically applied to the delivery of human services.