Consumer and Community Participation Fact Sheet M11: Plain Language Summaries

What are they?

A plain language summary is a brief outline of a research project or research proposal that has been written for members of the public rather than researchers or professionals. They are helpful in making information about research more open, transparent and accessible.

Plain language summaries are not an attempt to 'dumb down' scientific information. It is important to be able to speak or write about research in a way that potential funders, supporters, policy makers, consumers and the community can understand.

What should be covered in a plain language summary?

- Aims and purpose of the research.
- How the research will be conducted
- What are the intended benefits of the research

Useful reading

Getting it right for service users and carers, getting it right for research: How to decide whether to help researchers find people to take part in research. P47, TwoCan Associates (2008), Hove.

Researchers suggest plain language summaries are also useful for:

- Developing grant and ethics applications.
- Scholarship / bursary applications.
- Seeking consumer or community support and/or input.
- A recruitment tool.
- Media releases and informing the wider community.
- Presenting to a non-scientific audience.

Practical considerations

- Write as if you were explaining your research to a friend or family member with no scientific knowledge or background.
- Talk directly to the reader.
- Use simple words, avoid jargon and don't use acronyms.
- Be positive and direct, making sentences short and using bullet points.
- Use active verbs rather than passive.
- Don't turn verbs into nouns.
- Test your writing with consumers and community members.
- Consider if you need support or training in writing Plain Language Summaries. How do you access it?

Scientific Explanation

Using 26 years of data from a large population based birth cohort, we will investigate associations between restricted foetal growth, gestational age, apgar score and mode of delivery with incidence of Epilepsy. This will enable us to identify at risk groups within the population with the aim to improve the efficacy of current treatment regimes.
(Matt Cooper, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2010)

Plain Language Summary

We are looking at a large, diverse group of people to see if differences at birth (for example birth weight, health at birth and type of birth) can help identify what makes someone more likely than someone else to be affected by Epilepsy.
(Matt Cooper, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2010)

Reference: McKenzie A. Consumer and Community Participation Fact Sheet M11: Plain Language Summaries (2011).

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