International harvester

If McMaster is the pantheon of evidence-informed policy, then John Lavis is surely its modern-day Hadrian.

The Harvard- and London School of Economics-educated Director of the McMaster Health Forum is arming communities around the world with the tools and training they need to lead, manage, and create real change in the health of people.

The Forum's rise has been nothing short of meteoric. Since launching six years ago, it has built the most comprehensive source of evidence on how to strengthen and reform health systems. More than 20 people work daily reviewing databases around the world, extracting the best available evidence, and posting it to a free-access website in seven languages.

"We don't generate the evidence," Lavis concedes modestly, "but we have an unbelievably efficient mechanism for harvesting it."

That formula has paid off. The Health Systems Evidence web site has become a go-to spot for policymakers and stakeholders the world over who are looking to speed delivery of cost-effective programs, services and drugs to those who need them.

It has also spawned a panoply of other initiatives – evidence briefs, stakeholder dialogues, citizen panels and train-the-trainer sessions – to ensure that those with the power to change policy, be they in Canada or the farthest reaches of Africa or Latin America, have the knowledge to make the right decisions and the capacity to implement them.

Lavis' own role has been significant. When he stepped down recently as Chair of PAHO's Advisory Committee on Health Research, Director Carissa Etienne praised his "inspiring leadership" and contributions to "the development of regional and global policies and strategies that are making a difference".

In recognition of its global leadership in supporting the use of health systems knowledge, the Forum was named the WHO Collaborating Centre for Evidence-Informed Policy in 2010. It's a strong signal that research use matters.

Says Lavis: "We sit on the best evidence in the world, and we have the means to get this into the hands of those who are making decisions. It may not be a cure for cancer, but it will help to deliver proven treatments in the most effective and efficient ways possible."

> "We don't generate the evidence, but we have an unbelievably efficient mechanism for harvesting it."
>
> – John Lavis