On the right PATH

In 2003, when the Ontario government was urged to spend millions to provide drug-eluting stents for patients with acute coronary syndrome, it turned for advice to a group of McMaster health economists, clinical epidemiologists, decision scientists, biostatisticians and clinical pharmacologists.

The Program for Assessment of Technology in Health (PATH), founded by the late CE&B professor Bernie O'Brien, had assembled some of the leading researchers in the country to answer what every government policymaker wants to know: Do the health interventions we now fund, or propose to fund, produce the best patient outcomes for the money spent?

The answer, in this case, was no. Although the new stents were believed to produce better long-term outcomes than bare-metal stents, PATH found this was not always the case.

"We discovered they were most effective in high-risk patients, such as diabetics," says PATH's interim director Mitch Levine. "Identifying the optimal situation for these more expensive stents resulted in a policy shift that ended up saving the government $20 million a year."

PATH's systematic, transparent and unbiased approach to measuring the costs and outcomes of everything from new drugs to PET scanners to surgical procedures has earned it an international reputation and made it a trusted resource for arm's-length agencies advising governments on the best use of their healthcare dollars.

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>
> – Mitchell Levine

PATH has conducted policy-changing studies for the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Health Quality Ontario, the Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health, and biotech companies looking to bring new products to market.

Its researchers pioneered the methodological framework for field evaluations of non-drug technologies, and helped develop the first guidelines for the economic evaluation of new prescription drugs, a model since adopted around the world.

Levine says field evaluations conducted in real-world settings are what set PATH apart. "Most research studies are designed to show whether a technology can work. We look at how well it performs when it's actually used."