Local health department (LHD) practitioners develop evidence-based programs and policies by means of a complex process. Often referred to as evidence-based decision making (EBDM), this process involves making decisions on the basis of the best available scientific evidence, applying program planning and quality improvement frameworks, engaging the community in assessment and decision-making, and conducting sound evaluation. To inform efforts aimed at boosting performance of public health agencies, there should be a clearer understanding of decision making patterns in LHDs, particularly those that are based on scientific information.

Survey questions covered biographical data, administrative practices, diffusion attributes, barriers to EBDM, importance and use of resources, and competencies in evidence-based public health.

“When you make decisions about such things as program planning, policy development, or funding, how important to you are the following?”

- Health planning tools, 37%
- Success stories or lessons from peers, 38%
- Priorities of agency leadership, 39%
- Guidance from state health agency, 50%
- Legislative authority/federal funding source, 55%

“What methods allow you to learn about current findings in public health research?”

- Academic conferences, 22%
- Academic journals, 33%
- Email alerts, 34%
- Professional associations, 48%
- Seminars/workshops, 53%

KEY FINDINGS

- Educational background, population size, and leadership that encouraged EBDM were associated with a higher perceived importance of scientific resources.
- Most LHDs gain access to journals through agency subscriptions, state health agencies, or academic partners.
- Barriers to using academic journals include a lack of access (including the cost of subscriptions).

NEXT STEPS

- Improve use of resources
- Administrative evidence-based practices
- Practice active dissemination
- Show strong leadership support
- Provide incentives to support good decision-making practices
- Further research
- Increase training & education

Robert P. Fields, MPH | Katherine A Stamatakis, PhD, MPH | Kathleen Duggan, MPH, MS | Ross Brownson, PhD | Full text available here