1. Title:

Implementation failure or hype? Competing explanations for disappointing findings in human service delivery

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3. Key words:

Implementation Failure, Theory of change, process evaluation

4. Abstract text:

a. Background and aims

This paper will draw on a number of evaluations which have been conducted for various state and Commonwealth government departments over the past few years. Most of these evaluations found that the expected benefits to the intended targets of the programme were not found, or at least not to the extent that was anticipated. Two explanations are generally offered by programme funders; the programme was poorly implemented and/or the evaluation was conducted too early to expect the programme to have the full impact which was expected. However, a third explanation often appears to be the most plausible; that the programme theory of change vastly overestimated the potential benefits which could be expected from the activities undertaken within the programme.

b. Methods

This paper will present a small number of case studies drawn from evaluations of children's services, mental health and Indigenous programmes. The findings from the process evaluations will be summarized and the response from the evaluation funders will be indicated

c. Results

In all these process evaluations the expected benefits to end users were not fully achieved. In each case there were challenges to implementation, including resourcing issues, short timescales, personnel changes, policy shifts, resistant by staff, technological glitches etc. However, in each case the causes for lack of successful implementation were contested.

d. Conclusion

and will draw lessons for implementation evaluations about how to judge which one of these explanations is the most likely, and for programme implementers on how to be more realistic about the magnitude of impacts that can be expected from programmes in the human services, no matter how well implemented.