

Research Pods: A Paradigm Shift Within Complementary Medicine Research

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Abstract

This paper is an appreciative enquiry case study about values, theories, and activities of the Research Pods (Pods) within The Aurum Project (AP). AP is an Australian natural medicine not-for-profit research organization. The development of Pods represents a paradigm shift occurring within AP. The Pods initiative directly confronts the current conventional medical research paradigm by implementing transformative practices based on Teal Organisational Theory (Teal). The three main pillars of Teal are self-management, wholeness, and evolutionary purpose. These pillars impact the relationships formed in the Pods in a way that transforms Teal theory into practice. These practices enhance group dynamics by fostering resilience as well as producing research outcomes. Pods offers a novel approach for practitioners to engage in research activity in meaningful ways. AP began Pods in 2019, and current active Pods are progressing along this pathway. Our transformative process and implementation of Pods are discussed in this paper.

Introduction

This paper is an appreciative enquiry case study of the values, theories, and activities of the Research Pods (Pods) within The Aurum Project (AP). We incorporate the transcript from our presentation at the Transformations Conference Sydney, July 2023, with further discussion. We present a paradigm shift within the AP organization.

Our organizational change from an ill-fitting default hierarchical structure into one with dynamic flexibility occurred in 2019 with the start of Pods.

AP is a not-for-profit Australian research organization dedicated to improving the health and well-being of children through natural medicine research. This is an area of research not supported by funding in Australia from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the Australian Research Council (ARC), or other medical research funding pathways usually available for medical research. AP research is fully funded by donations from the public, an active online bookshop, and other fundraising activities.

Each year, there is a very small amount of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) research undertaken in Australia compared to conventional medical research. What does it take to get practitioners involved in undertaking research in their fields of practice? We have some anecdotal information in Australia that CAM practitioners feel uninspired by the

current medical research paradigm. We also have a very specific set of circumstances within the field of homeopathy, a confluence of medical paradigm differences as well as political factors; both have led us to find alternative pathways to fund and conduct research that is meaningful within our discipline (Salter & Goddard, 2022).

Let's dive into what we're doing to encourage motivation and engagement and, at the same time, create resilience amongst CAM practitioners.

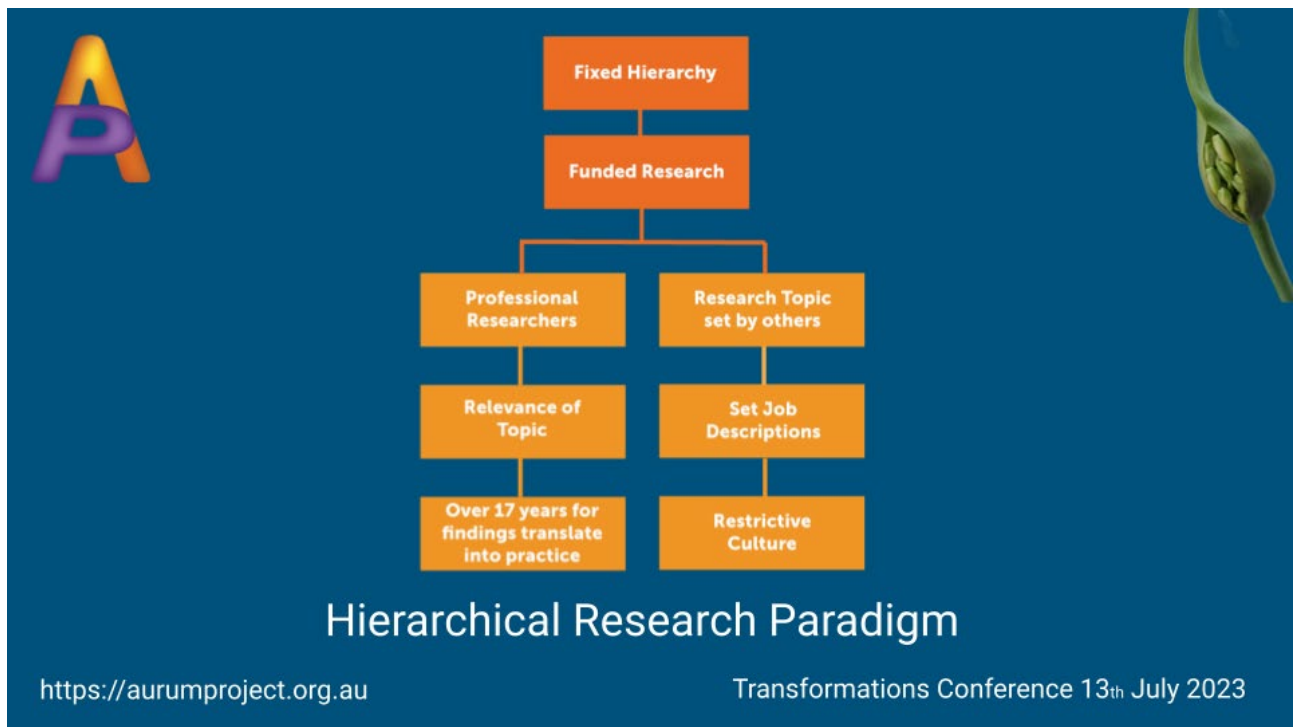


Figure 1 Hierarchical Research Paradigm

A Brief Look at the Current System

Typically, medical research occurs in large research organizations, universities, medical foundations, and large teaching hospitals.

Figure 1 shows the current paradigm of hierarchical research structure with some qualities of the system.

The characteristics of these systems include:

- Usually, a large research team is created with a fixed hierarchical structure.
- The project leader is often well-established in the field and has a strong international reputation in the field.
- Research is funded to produce a specific outcome - either for social or corporate ends.
- The question of “who usually sets that agenda?” is set within the hierarchy.
- Students undertake individual packets of research in research modules that build an overall research effort.
- Most often, they fundamentally work alone to achieve a research qualification, e.g., a PhD.
- Researchers are employed according to their skills in research, and these skills are

exchangeable and replaceable.

- Existing researchers gain kudos and credit from increasing publications as these build reputation.
- All of these actions are directed to the self as a motivator.
- It can take researchers a long time to find a “research home,” a funding source, and a place of stability to create more ideas and test them.
- The well-being of individual researchers and their feelings are not paramount to the success of the project.
- Competing for places with unsure tenure.

There is no doubt that this typical structure will deliver research outcomes on time and with positive strong foundations that can be built upon in future research. This is how the system has been operating for decades. It is the vicious cycle of endeavor that Donnie Maclurcan refers to in his presentation, *Embodying Post Growth Leadership* (14th July, 1 pm TC'23). It is based on the premise that there is a problem (in this case, a condition or sickness), and we have to fix it. In doing so, we identify more problems that need to be fixed. This arises from the reductionist view of our health and well-being, which is that we are individual parts that can only be known by breaking them down into smaller and smaller parts. We can only be well when these parts are all fixed, or the sickness is removed. In this process, the disease becomes the all, and the human with the disease is somewhat lost in the haze.

There are questions possible within our new paradigm that are not asked inside this conventional system: Who sets the agenda for research? How easily is the agenda shifted to meet the needs of the community? How can we set up the research in a way that optimizes researchers' experience and well-being?

Within the current medical paradigm, we can see the extraordinary effort going into the testing and creation of drugs to treat disease, all requiring large sums of money to conduct the research with expectations of large financial returns. We could use the most recent large-scale international funding and expense associated with mRNA vaccine development for COVID-19 as an example. These expensive treatments are then not often available to all in the global community, only to those who can pay; for instance, refer to the Pacific Island Nations' access to vaccines during the pandemic. There is little reference to the fundamental question: is there an easier, better, more cost-effective, or different way to find a solution for greater equity in community health?

Initiating Change

At AP, we realized that our community would benefit from proactive steps to change how we engaged with one another professionally, thereby building capacity for practitioner-led research by our professional members. We specialize in homeopathy, which is a discipline acknowledged and adopted by several countries as part of their health care system and acknowledged by the World Health Organisation as a significant traditional medicine. Despite this, within Australia, the public, political, and medical discourse set our profession aside as not only irrelevant but actively and politically marginalized as a healthcare option. To follow that story is like reading a thriller novel and you can find a condensed version of the intrigue, which is incidentally continuing, in our paper (Salter & Goddard, 2022).

We decided to bring practitioners together, who typically work in professional silos of isolation, to create opportunities to build deeper professional relationships. We created a space to be heard and to encourage motivation through their shared experience. In this space, they were heard, acknowledged, and supported by their peers. We began this in 2015 in an online space called Connecting Homeopaths (Goddard, 2019). The intention is also to generate a resilient community, collaborate, and build capacity within the homeopathic profession of Australia.

In 2019, we took a further step, asking the question: Is there a way to encourage practitioners to participate in research while also undertaking their clinical practice? Could we expand the initial practice of connectivity and building relationships within a structure that could support the individual, as well as support the profession, by generating research output?

We began by forming Pods, which are small groups of practitioners (3-6) coming together with a common aim to work on a research topic of their choosing.



Figure 2 Teal Organisational Theory and Self Determination Theory

Teal Organisational Theory

Since that time, we have come to realize that the steps we have taken and the way we have taken them are essentially based on the Teal Organisation Theory (Laloux, 2014). In that system, self-management, wholeness, and evolutionary purposefulness are known as the three pillars.

Self-Management

In our Pods, self-management is key, and the structure within the Pod is non-hierarchical. The Pod members determine how they will work, when they will meet, what they want to

achieve, and what they need to do to achieve their goals. This is in contrast to a conventional research team, where the funding models often dictate the research activity, and the choice of team members is based on skill set and experience. For example, in a Pod, a research topic of interest is chosen by the members instead of being assigned by an individual funding body. There is a lot of freedom because of the self-management aspect within the Pods, and the choice of topics is distinctly organic in their evolution. With that freedom of choice comes increased and shared responsibility. These research decisions are based on AP selection criteria and professional relevance. However, underpinning homeopathic philosophy, organizational capacity, and public health priorities are also taken into account. In addition, there are AP research policies based on NHMRC research policies, and these are adhered to as a matter of due diligence.

We have found that there is importance in how people come together in these Pods because building relationships between people is the essential glue for a Pod to work. This can occur in spaces where personal focus and combined passion are able to flourish. While it is true that a group of people can come together in a team and focus on a topic of interest, this alone does not make the group function as a Pod or reflect anything about the new paradigm. It is the depth of relationships formed between the Pod members which is the variable that allows the group to actually operate within the new paradigm. This new relational structure then becomes the foundation of how the Pod operates, *not* the traditional organizational structure. The self-management emphasis ensures each member takes responsibility for their contribution to the Pod. There is no boundary on that; it is self-regulated by its members and through the relationships they form. It also means that people are not in the Pod only to conduct a task. They are there to work together to fulfill the aims they set and find the solutions for that endeavor together, which include the group's dynamics as well as the research activity. This may mean there is a need to implement discussion or conflict resolution practices.

Wholeness

Another key aspect is every member bringing their whole self to the Pod. Of course, this is a continuum, and more established Pods have achieved a greater depth of relationship and understand how to do this at a deeper level. This is a significant change from “I’ll bring my professional research self” to the Pod. That is the easy part, especially if you already have research experience.

What does bringing one’s whole self to the Pod mean? It means having the ability to appear and contribute in a way that is authentic to the people involved. It also includes the idea of sharing the things that might be drawing your attention away from the research focus, as well as sharing how you really are at that moment. For example, what percentage of attention are you bringing to the Pod when you have a sick child, a dying parent, or a failing relationship? Maybe Pod members don’t even feel like turning up, as this other issue is taking up too much of their energy to spend time thinking about research. If they do turn up, they are partly preoccupied, and their energy for the project is just not as available.

To shift such a dynamic, there are processes and techniques that build trust that involve sharing what is going on and how each person is turning up today. These techniques are applied in the process of ‘Checking In,’ and over time, really do allow the trust and relationships between the Pod to build. ‘Checking in’ is a circle process used at the beginning

of a meeting to help Pod members connect and get into a frame of mind for sharing, being creative, or whatever is happening that day. It reminds everyone of their commitment to the Pod's intention and helps them be truly present. Check-ins proceed around the circle with members sharing how they are arriving that day, their emotional state, or recent insights, and are ideal for online meetings. The role of the other members, while someone is speaking is to be present and truly listen. When time permits, a longer check-in could begin with a question: "Tell us why you originally were interested in this topic?" A check-in question like "Tell us a little about how you are arriving today" could be a shorter check-in.

Recently, we had a relevant example in one Pod where some members had previously experienced institutionalized racism in other research settings in Australia. This past experience emerged through our check-in process as members reported agreeing to everything that had been proposed. They did this so that they would not be targeted and intimidated in workplace settings. The trust in the Pod grew as a result of this sharing. How can you have a free flow of ideas and creativity when the very foundations for creativity could be stifled in this way? In the new paradigm, trust is a core element.

Evolutionary Purposefulness

This leads us to the third pillar of Teal Theory - evolutionary purposefulness. This elusive quality is not simply an organization's mission or vision. According to Laloux (2014), it is something much deeper and seminal to the organization as a whole; it is a quality that is imbued in each of our activities. There are moments that arise in each Pod that demonstrate the evolutionary purpose of the organization. It occurs in every project when all of the Pod members are on the same page and are exploring the direction of the project in some way. It is that *other* solution, one that no individual came up with alone, but through the cohesion and relationality of the group, the core of our purpose is seen and heard by all involved as an "aha!" moment.

The evolutionary purpose of The Aurum Project, according to our latest version (Goddard & Salter, 2023), is to support practitioners in conducting research to empower patients in their use of homeopathy for their family's health and well-being.

The idea of an evolutionary purpose can sound esoteric, but a practical example is as follows: In one Pod, we were exploring the medical research on the topic of urinary tract infection, setting the scope and research question. We are homeopaths, and a key aspect of the homeopathic process is the integration of mental, emotional, and physical states and exploring the health of the person, not only the physical disease state. One member raised this in our discussions, and the pathway forward immediately became clear to all. This was our collective "aha" moment.

Self Determination Theory and Relatedness

Along with Teal, the importance of Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) has also been noted as essential for our process. The Self Determination Theory proposes that motivation is driven by autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as seen in Figure 2. Our focus in AP has been on building relatedness. This is because, in our community, the practitioners who are in active practice have high levels of autonomy as well as high levels of professional competence. However, although relatedness is high with our patients, it is low

between professional members, and this is one area where we have something to improve. Hence, we have created opportunities for practitioners to increase their relatedness. As time goes on we expect to also be focussing on specific research competence as well as encouraging further autonomy for the Pods themselves. The process is essentially, at its core, dynamic and always evolving.

Intrinsic motivation is also necessary for this transformation and is where creativity, fun, and flow can occur in the research project. This type of motivation is deeply important when the structure which the researchers are operating within is based on the relationships between people, rather than the roles they hold. In other words, the actual person in the Pod is important, not a particular skill they may have, such as understanding statistics or diagnosing a disease. The members are valued within the Pod in a way that transcends the idea of needing to add value. This supports the Pod and its members in creating opportunities for intrinsic motivation to be fostered and for growth. Add in a group culture that facilitates the whole self to be present and provides a nurturing space for Pod self-management to occur, and we see it all begin to come together.

While practitioners involved in Pods also benefit from growing their professional portfolio, often a more powerful intrinsic motivator is about contributing to creating a better future for society and giving back to one's own professional community.

Conclusion: The Hierarchical Structure is Dissolved

By focussing on relatedness, we find that the hierarchical structure begins to naturally dissolve over time. Could this be a new kind of organizational chart? (Figure 3). The hierarchy is replaced by the relationships between the individual participants in the research. The other change that we see is the dynamic state of the research field; it is scary when you're used to knowing what's what, knowing what the structure is, and possibly what to expect. It invites a place of 'not knowing' as fundamental to the research activity; instead of a null hypothesis on paper, it is a null hypothesis in the research team.



Figure 3. Our new paradigm

It takes time to build trust and relatedness. In our example from AP, we've found it takes about two years of relationship building for people to feel at home within the Teal approach. It also needs people in the organization who are able to hold and accept the tension of indecision and uncertainty as the Pod finds its way. A core group needs to be a beacon for the new Pods' formation.

Characteristics of this new paradigm:

- Once the Pod relationship strengthens, research activity “takes off” because the connection between people is strong. The trust generated is allowing the group to creatively thrive and problem-solve
- Participation by all researchers at their level of competence
- Application of research directly into practice
- Acknowledgment of learning, adaptation, and implementation as a process
- There is joint satisfaction through publication, organizational celebration, acknowledgment, and, in time, financial support
- Contribution to the community intrinsically motivates members to continue to participate

Future Directions

We are also measuring two key factors, resilience, and workplace isolation, to gauge the effect of implementing these processes. The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-25) and the Workplace Isolation scale will provide clear metrics on how the Pod initiative improves the relational capacity within research teams (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Marshall et al., 2007). This will provide further evidence to our community on the benefit of connecting with their peers. Future research may include comparative analysis with

conventional research approaches in terms of outcomes, efficiency, and researcher satisfaction.

As far as preliminary results are concerned, there were five AP Pod posters accepted at the 13th Australian Homoeopathic Medicine Conference 2023, indicating longevity, resilience, and research development capacity are growing within Pods.

Pods have a strong resonance with the practitioner-based research methods described by PRACI (Reid & Steel 2015), and we believe the Pods approach is applicable to other natural medicine disciplines and practitioners who commonly work alone and are typically professionally isolated.

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