Facilitation roles and characteristics associated with research use by healthcare professionals: a scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Background Implementing research findings into practice is a complex process that is not well understood. Facilitation has been described as a key component of getting research findings into practice. The literature on facilitation as a practice innovation is growing. This review aimed to identify facilitator roles and to describe characteristics of facilitation that may be associated with successful research use by healthcare professionals.

Methods We searched 10 electronic databases up to December 2016 and used predefined criteria to select articles. We included conceptual papers and empirical studies that described facilitator roles, facilitation processes or interventions, and that focused on healthcare professionals and research use. We used content and thematic analysis to summarise data. Rogers’ five main attributes of an innovation guided our synthesis of facilitation characteristics.

Results Of the 38 488 articles identified from our online and manual search, we included 195 predominantly research studies. We identified nine facilitator roles: opinion leaders, coaches, champions, research facilitators, clinical/practice facilitators, outreach facilitators, linking agents, knowledge brokers and external-internal facilitators. Fifteen facilitation characteristics were associated with research use, which we grouped into five categories using Rogers’ innovation attributes: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability.

Conclusions We found a diverse and broad literature on the concept of facilitation that can expand our current thinking about facilitation as an innovation and its potential to support an integrated, collaborative approach to improving healthcare delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars describe the potential for evidence-based decision making to have a positive impact on patient outcomes.1 Implementing evidence (ie, research findings) into practice is a complex, multifaceted process that requires a proactive effort to encourage use at the point of decision making.2–4 Multilevel factors influence this implementation5; some of these include individual (eg, education, attitude),6–8 organisational/contextual,9–14 system14 and innovation-specific factors.15 Several knowledge translation (KT) theories exist that can be used to guide the process of getting research evidence into practice.16 In their Promoting Action on Research Implementation in Health Services (PARiHS) framework, Kitson and colleagues17 highlighted the importance of facilitation that, along with strong evidence and a context supportive of change, can lead to successful research implementation. Facilitation is a technique where an individual makes things easier for others, by providing support to help them change their ways of thinking and working.17 In their refined integrated framework i-PARiHS, facilitation is an active element that integrates the other core constructs: innovation, recipients and context.18

In the healthcare literature, a small body of conceptual work on facilitation has considered it a promising approach to implementing evidence into practice.17–21 Facilitation has...
evolved from a concept in the education and counseling literature to an implementation intervention in the healthcare and KT literature, and has recently been situated in the organisational learning theory literature. The literature on facilitation roles and characteristics is growing. Thompson and colleagues delineated the similarities and differences between five roles that aim to influence a practice or behaviour change: opinion leader, facilitator, champion, linking agent and change agent, noting much ambiguity remains among these roles. Harvey and colleagues explored the purpose, roles, skills and attributes of facilitators, suggesting that the concept of facilitation is only partially developed. Dogherty et al updated Harvey et al’s literature review and reported that, in addition to facilitation as role and process, project management and leadership were important components of facilitation.

Two reviews have been conducted specifically on practice facilitation, also described as outreach facilitation, where facilitators assist primary care physicians with research implementation and quality improvement projects. These studies found that practice facilitators were effective in improving practice processes and patient care outcomes, and primary care physicians were almost three times more likely to adopt evidence-based guidelines with practice facilitation. Although some preliminary evidence supports practice facilitation as an effective intervention to implement evidence into practice, facilitation as a construct requires further development and testing for its effectiveness in improving outcomes.

Implementation methods—such as facilitation—can be viewed as practice innovations. Rogers defined an innovation as an idea or practice that is perceived as new by an individual. He described five main attributes of an innovation: (1) relative advantage—the perception that an innovation is better or more beneficial than existing practice; (2) high compatibility—the perception that the innovation is consistent with existing values, beliefs and needs; (3) low complexity—the perception that the innovation is easy to understand and use; (4) trialability—the opportunity to try the innovation before making a decision about its adoption; and (5) observability—the extent to which the effects of the innovation are observed and communicated to others. Innovations with all of these qualities tend to be adopted more rapidly than other innovations.

By treating facilitation as an innovation and healthcare providers as potential adopters, we can better understand how the roles and characteristics of facilitation may contribute to successfully implementing research into practice. Our review complements and extends the review by Dogherty et al, which explored elements of facilitation based on an existing systematic review of the effectiveness of interventions to increase the use of practice guidelines in nursing. Our study adds to the evidence base on facilitation by describing the various roles and the characteristics of facilitation from the healthcare and management literature in the context of healthcare professionals that includes practice guidelines and other forms of research use, and the roles undertaken to facilitate the uptake of evidence. The research questions guiding this scoping review were:

1. What are the key facilitator roles identified in the literature?
2. What characteristics of facilitation contribute to research use by healthcare professionals?

**METHODS**

We conducted a scoping review of the literature using Arksey and O’Malley’s framework to guide our review. Their scoping review framework has five stages: (1) identifying the research question; (2) identifying relevant studies; (3) study selection; (4) charting the data; (5) collating, summarising and reporting the results; and an optional stage of a consultation exercise with stakeholders. We searched the following 10 electronic databases from the healthcare and management literature: ABI Inform (1970–2016), Business Source Complete (1986–2016), CINAHL (1982–2016), Cochrane Library (2003–2016), EBMR (1991–2016), Embase (1980–2016), Medline (in process and other non-indexed citations) (1950–2016), PscyINFO (1806–2016), Scopus (1960–2016) and Web of Science (1990–2016). We developed our search strategy with a research librarian who constructed expert searches tailored to each of the databases searched (box 1). Key terms and final search strategies were refined based on initial search results. For example, because our initial search revealed a large number of articles we decided not to search grey (unindexed) literature such as conference proceedings, dissertations, editorials and government reports. We manually searched reference lists of included papers to identify additional studies.

**Selection criteria**

We included conceptual papers and empirical studies both quantitative and qualitative that met the following criteria: (1) facilitator roles, characteristics, facilitation processes and/or interventions were described; (2) facilitation focused on healthcare providers; and (3) facilitation focused on research use in practice. We excluded: non-English literature; study protocols; articles that focused solely on facilitation directed towards patients; articles focused solely on computerised/automated reminder systems or decision support systems.

**Selection process**

Three team members independently screened one-third of the references for inclusion. Because of the volume of search results, we first excluded references based on...
Box 1 Example of search strategy: Medline

| Search terms | Database Search results |
|--------------|-------------------------|
| 1. (facilitator* or facilitative or facilitation).tw. | ABI Inform 1710 |
| 2. facilitation.ti. or reminder systems/ | Business Source Complete 2100 |
| 3. (academic detail* or educational outreach worker* or opinion leader* or change agent* or champion* or linking agent* or promotor* or knowledge broker* or enabler* or enabling or boundary spanner* or coach*).tw. | CINAHL 2539 |
| 4. or/1–3 | Cochrane Library 2 |
| 5. evidence-based practice/ or evidence-based dentistry/ or evidence-based medicine/ or evidence-based emergency medicine/ or evidence-based nursing/ | EBMR Central 161 |
| 6. (ebp or ebm or ebn or cpg* or best practice*).tw. | Embase 10453 |
| 7. (evidence adj2 practice*).tw. | Medline including Medline in process 7777 |
| 8. (guideline* adj2 (implement* or adher*)).tw. | PsycINFO 3278 |
| 9. guideline adherence/ or quality assurance, health care/ or benchmarking/ or guidelines as topic/ or practice guidelines as topic/ | Scopus 5661 |
| 10. (quality adj1 (improv* or manage*)).tw. | Web of Science 4807 |
| 11. ‘diffusion of innovation/’ or technology transfer/ | Total 38488 |
| 12. (research adj2 (‘use’ or utili?* or adopt* or implement* or disseminate* or uptake or transfer* or translat* or support)).tw. | |
| 13. (knowledge adj2 (‘use’ or utili?* or adopt* or implement* or disseminate* or uptake or transfer* or translat* or support)).tw. | |
| 14. (evidence adj2 (‘use’ or utili?* or adopt* or implement* or disseminate* or uptake or transfer* or translat* or support)).tw. | |
| 15. (innovation adj2 adopt*).tw. | |
| 16. or/5–15 | |
| 17. 4 and 16 | |
| 18. facilitation.mp. | |
| 19. 18 not 17 | |
| 20. ‘outcome and process assessment (health care)/’ or ‘outcome assessment (health care)/’ or treatment outcome/ or ‘process assessment (health care)/’ | |
| 21. quality assurance, health care/ or benchmarking/ | |
| 22. Quality Control/ | |
| 23. ‘Delivery of Health Care’/og [Organization & Administration] | |
| 24. og.fs. | |
| 25. or/20–24 | |
| 26. 19 and 16 and 25 | |
| 27. 17 or 26 | |
| 28. (comment or editorial or letter or news or newspaper article).pt. | |
| 29. 27 not 28 | |

Irrelevant titles and abstracts. Approximately 10% of articles were screened together for training and reliability. The team met periodically prior to and during screening to ensure consistency between reviewers.

Data charting

We developed a data dictionary detailing information to collect, for consistency between reviewers throughout charting. Each reviewer was assigned one-third of the included articles and extracted the following data elements: citation, purpose, theoretical framework, study design/method, sample and setting, description of facilitation role, characteristics, process and/or intervention. We did not appraise the quality of data extracted as the aim of the scoping review was to identify facilitator roles and characteristics of facilitation from the literature.

Data analysis and synthesis

We conducted a content analysis of extracted data to identify facilitator roles and characteristics of facilitation. Next, we conducted a thematic analysis using extracted data to further identify characteristics of facilitation. Because we conceptualised facilitation as an innovation, in the final analytical step, we used Rogers’ attributes of an innovation as a framework to first sort and then to synthesise within each category our identified characteristics of facilitation. We did not report literature review papers that included studies cited in our scoping review in our roles or attributes results tables to avoid duplication.

Stakeholder consultation

We consulted with stakeholders early in analysis to inform and validate findings. Our decision-maker partner (CC) arranged for two study team members to meet with seven regional managers from a large healthcare organisation for feedback on the identified facilitator roles. These managers provided feedback on understandability, meaningfulness, and usefulness and relevance to practice of the facilitator roles.

RESULTS

Our searches found a combined total of 38,488 references (table 1). After removing duplicates and adding 18 articles from our manual search, we screened 26,593 articles and identified 791 as potentially relevant. Of these, 195 met our selection criteria and were included in our review (figure 1). We report characteristics of included studies (see online supplementary file 1), followed by facilitator roles (table 2) and characteristics (attributes) of facilitation (table 3).
Characteristics of included studies

Our sample included 130 primary research articles: quantitative (n=63), qualitative (n=39) and mixed methods (n=28) (used both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods). The remainder were descriptive papers (n=34), literature reviews (n=20) and theoretical/conceptual papers (n=11).

Over half of the research studies (n=85/130) included a mix of healthcare providers in their samples (eg, nurses and physicians); the remainder included a single healthcare provider group. Study setting was reported in 120 studies; the most frequent were hospitals (34%), primary care (23%) and other community-based facilities (18%). Less frequently cited were studies with more than one setting (13%), long-term care (8%), home care (2%) and symposiums (2%). For studies that also reported the country (n=120), most were conducted in the USA (29%), Canada (23%), UK (18%), Europe (10%) and Australia (9%). Some studies included more than one country (6%). A few studies were conducted in Africa (3%) and one in Singapore (1%) and Nicaragua (1%).

Nine definitions of facilitation were used (table 4). The definitions of facilitation from the PARiHS framework were the most frequently cited (n=19). A common thread in seven of the nine definitions is that facilitation is viewed as a process of providing support to enable change to occur.4 17 18 20 29–31 The other two definitions were notably different as they did not include process in their definitions. One article focused on relationships, the personal contact and support required, while the other article highlighted facilitation as a strategy for learning.33

In 77/195 articles, a theory or conceptual framework(s) guided research or contextualised findings. Most frequently cited were the PARiHS framework (n=16), change theories (eg, Lewin’s theory of change)34 (n=10) and Rogers’ diffusion of innovation theory35 (n=10). Sixteen papers used more than one theory or framework.4 35–49 For example, papers citing the PARiHS framework had used it to: inform the decision to involve both external and internal facilitators41; conceptualise a nurse pain champion role40; guide design of a KT intervention for continuous improvement of patient care and evidence-based practice (EBP)38; and assist with the description of processes and outcomes of an EBP training programme.50 Examples of other frameworks used are Donabedian’s structure, process, outcome model37 51–54; Graham et al’s Knowledge to Action Framework41 48 56 57; and May et al’s Normalization Process Theory.59

Facilitator roles

We identified nine facilitator roles: opinion leaders, coaches, champions, research facilitators, clinical/practice facilitators, outreach facilitators, linking agents, knowledge brokers and external-internal facilitators. Of note, overlap exists in the terms used to describe a clinical facilitator and a practice facilitator, and a practice facilitator and outreach facilitator. We describe conditions under which each role is considered most appropriate based on locality (facilitators located internal to the organisation, external, or combined external and internal) and formality (formal appointed role vs informal role). These nine facilitator roles expand (both in number and scope) those...
## Table 2: Results: Facilitator Roles, n=150 Articles

| Facilitator                | Internal          | External          | External-Internal |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
|                            | Informal          | Formal            |                    |
| Opinion leader             |                   |                   |                   |
| Coach                      |                   |                   |                   |
| Champion                   |                   |                   |                   |
| Research facilitator       |                   |                   |                   |
| Clinical/practice facilitator |                 |                   |                   |
| Outreach facilitator       |                   |                   |                   |
| Boundary spanner           |                   |                   |                   |
| Linking agent              |                   |                   |                   |
| Knowledge broker           |                   |                   |                   |
|                           |                   |                   |                   |

### Key Roles

- **Educationally influential about EBP**
- **Provide feedback about research use**
- **Provide encouragement/motivation, positive reinforcement to use EBP**
- **Planning and goal setting**
- **Assist others with learning process**
- **Role model**
- **Build relationships**

### Facilitation

- **Facilitate research in a clinical setting**
- **Advocate change**
- **Provide educational sessions about the research process**
- **Strengthen research skills of clinical staff**
- **Provide peer support for participation in research activities**
- **Establish local research programmes, committees, workshops, steering groups**

### Training

- **Not trained for role**
- **May be trained for role**
- **Typically trained for role**

### Results: Facilitator Roles, n=150 Articles

| Definition                                                                 | Informal          | Formal            | External          | External-Internal |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| A peer-nominated individual who informally influences individuals’ attitudes, professional behaviour, decision making, research use, clinically and educationally using their professional status to drive change |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| An individual who assists with behaviour changes to improve performance and/or to use EBP through motivation, encouragement and positive reinforcement |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| A local visionary who uses expert knowledge to persuade others to adopt an innovation, idea or project |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| An individual who provides support to staff to strengthen their research skills and knowledge, and participation in research in a clinical setting |                   |                   |                   |                   |
| An individual who provides continuous (primarily) local assistance to others through a formal implementation process using peer support (e.g., formal/informal education, shared learning and being a resource person) |                   |                   |                   |                   |

### Key Roles

- **Persuade others to adopt an innovation, idea or project**
- **Provide feedback, ideas or support for research use**
- **Advocate change**
- **Provide educational sessions about the research process**
- **Identify modifiable barriers to research use**
- **Identify resources for change**
- **Provide education, peer support, shared learning**
- **Monitor and evaluate practice change**
- **Establish local research programmes, committees, workshops, steering groups**
- **Some practice facilitators were external**
- **Provide audit and performance feedback**
- **Provide information/resources to promote uptake of best practice**
- **Build good working relationship between staff and facilitator**
- **Link to research and practice**
- **Help bring together two systems**
- **Catalyst for system change**
- **Promote research use in decision making**
- **Build networks, personal, professional, organisational, trust**
- **Facilitate learning and exchange of knowledge**
- **Establish communication channels**
- **Conduct environmental scan/needs assessment**
- **Knowledge management, capacity building, linkage and exchange activities**
- **Not trained for role**
- **Typically trained for role**
- **Trained for role**

### Notes

- Full table continues on the next page.

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Open Access
| Facilitation | Internal | Formal |
|--------------|----------|--------|
| Opinion leader | – Peer nominated | – Negotiation skills |
| Coach | – Expert knowledge of innovation | – Expert research knowledge/experience |
| Champion | – Expert research knowledge/experience | – Experienced/skilled practitioners (eg, physicians, nurses) |
| Research facilitator | – Expert knowledge in work area/clinical work experience | – Experience in management/business or health administration |
| Clinical/practice facilitator | – Expert knowledge in work area/clinical work experience | – Expert knowledge in work area/clinical work experience |
| Outreach facilitator | – Expert knowledge in work area/clinical work experience | – Experience in management/business or health administration |
| Linking agent | – Expertise in both communities/cultures (research and policy) | – Strong interpersonal and communication skills |
| Knowledge broker | – Strong critical thinking skills | – Strong interpersonal and communication skills |
| External-internal facilitators | – Strong critical thinking skills | – Strong interpersonal and communication skills |

Key attributes and skills:
- Peer nominated
- Influential
- Credible/trustworthy
- Clinical knowledge/experience
- Role model
- Communication skills

AD, academic detailing; CQI, continuous quality improvement; EBP, evidence-based practice.
## Table 3 Results: characteristics (attributes) of facilitation, n=133 articles

| Rogers’ attribute of an innovation | Characteristics of facilitation | Illustrative examples from the literature |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Relative advantage Facilitation could be considered advantageous because it is described in the literature as a process for making change easier for others by: (1) encouraging assessment of current practice, (2) presenting ideas to others, (3) creating useful communication networks, and (4) providing support and resources to achieve goals | Encourages assessment of current practice  ► Encourages the assessment of current practice/performance gaps 4,32,101,140-142  ► Helps others understand gaps between the knowledge and practice of the target audience 36,171  ► Helps individuals and teams to understand what they need to change and how they need to change it in order to apply evidence into practice 17,101,145,146  ► Facilitation occurs in the context of a recognised need for improvement (eg, supports best practice) 36,77,143-145  Presents ideas to others  ► Introduces the existence of desirable new ideas and enhances the knowledge base about new ideas 4,67,78,79,148  Creates useful communication networks  ► Facilitates effective communication 36,57,159,205  ► Establishes/navigates communication channels 4,60,128,152  ► Networks with other health professionals about best practices 143,180,205  Provides support and resources to achieve goals  ► Facilitator as ongoing support or resource 4,30,41,48,49,56,57,78,86,92,94,95,133,141,142,147-156  ► Offers or identifies resources to assist with the process of change 32,33,44,78,142,151,156,190,198  ► Monitors progress 36,57,111,147  ► Builds organisational support for new practices 151,157  ► Provides structure for learning 33  ► Supports a goal-oriented process 4,118 |
Table 3  Continued

| Rogers' attribute of an innovation | Characteristics of facilitation                                                                 | Illustrative examples from the literature                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Compatibility                     | A key purpose of facilitation is to make change more compatible with existing practice. There are several characteristics of facilitation that promote compatibility with existing practice including: (5) mobilising existing knowledge and skills, (6) enhancing staff readiness for change and empowering staff, (7) supporting/promoting a culture for change, and (8) tailoring facilitation activities to local context, needs and circumstances | Mobilising existing knowledge and skills\(^{34}\)  
Enhances staff readiness for change; empowers staff  
► Increases perceptions of professional acceptability and subjective norms\(^{35}\)  
► Enables individuals and teams to analyse, reflect and change their own attitudes, behaviours and ways of working\(^{366}\)  
► Facilitator belief that the change is needed\(^{69-76}\)  
► Facilitator framed knowledge so that it was relevant to staff practice\(^{158}\)  
► Empowers staff to be equal participants\(^{35}\) |

Supports and promotes a culture for change; creates a supportive climate; creates a vision for research use/evidence-based practice  
► Creates a local climate in which research activities are encouraged\(^{128-130}\)  
► Creates a culture to sustain the implemented change\(^{40,44,45,75}\)  
► Addresses and develops organisational systems\(^{50}\) and infrastructure to facilitate success of the innovation\(^{148-153}\)  
► Facilitator must understand the practical realities of healthcare and clinical settings\(^{69,164}\)  
► Helps others make choices based on their own context\(^{134}\)  
► Addresses individual concerns and helps others to change behaviour through the provision of information or evidence\(^{66}\)  
► Creates and supports an organisational vision for evidence-based practice\(^{62,163}\)  
Tailors facilitation activities to local context, needs and circumstances  
► Facilitator helps the group to consider and address the local issues that might negatively affect the use of the recommendations\(^{166}\)  
► Facilitation activities tailored to local context, needs and circumstances\(^{49,50,56,61,75,103,142,150,165-171}\)  
Continued
Complexity

Facilitation can assist others with the implementation process. Facilitation capitalises on existing skills and (9) supports the development of new knowledge and skills, (10) requires facilitators to be trained or have experience with this role, (11) may comprise several strategies, and (12) is described as a bidirectional process that fosters relationship building.

- Supports the development of new knowledge and skills
  - Helps staff to learn to access and/or appraise evidence to answer clinical questions and apply it to their practice
  - Assesses and meets staff learning needs
  - Guides the learners
- Facilitator training
  - Ongoing support for the facilitator role
  - Facilitators require training
  - Facilitators are experienced mentors, and must have a basic knowledge of the problems experienced by staff
  - More than one facilitator (champion) was needed when an improvement required people to change behaviours
- Multiple components
  - Use of multiple strategies (eg, reminders and a nurse facilitator)
  - (eg, opinion leader education and audit and feedback)
- Bidirectional process
  - Facilitation is proactive and dynamic
  - Facilitation drives a process of change; a two-way process of communication, building relationships/reciprocal relationships, and mutual goals and opportunities
  - An iterative process in which the next step is informed by the conditions preceding it
  - Flexible and purposeful
  - A process of interactive problem solving
  - Internal/external facilitation or a combination thereof
  - Enabling approach

Trialability

The literature provided some examples of facilitation interventions that were pilot tested on a small scale prior to full implementation.

- Pilot test; feasibility studies

Table 3  Continued

| Rogers’ attribute of an innovation | Characteristics of facilitation | Illustrative examples from the literature |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Complexity                        | Facilitation can assist others with the implementation process. Facilitation capitalises on existing skills and (9) supports the development of new knowledge and skills, (10) requires facilitators to be trained or have experience with this role, (11) may comprise several strategies, and (12) is described as a bidirectional process that fosters relationship building | Supports the development of new knowledge and skills
  - Helps staff to learn to access and/or appraise evidence to answer clinical questions and apply it to their practice
  - Assesses and meets staff learning needs
  - Guides the learners
- Facilitator training
  - Ongoing support for the facilitator role
  - Facilitators require training
  - Facilitators are experienced mentors, and must have a basic knowledge of the problems experienced by staff
  - More than one facilitator (champion) was needed when an improvement required people to change behaviours
- Multiple components
  - Use of multiple strategies (eg, reminders and a nurse facilitator)
  - (eg, opinion leader education and audit and feedback)
- Bidirectional process
  - Facilitation is proactive and dynamic
  - Facilitation drives a process of change; a two-way process of communication, building relationships/reciprocal relationships, and mutual goals and opportunities
  - An iterative process in which the next step is informed by the conditions preceding it
  - Flexible and purposeful
  - A process of interactive problem solving
  - Internal/external facilitation or a combination thereof
  - Enabling approach |
identified in previous reviews. For each role, we provide a definition, key features, training requirements, and key personal attributes and skills (Table 2). As each facilitator role included change agent activities, we did not include change agent as a separate role.

Stakeholder feedback on the identified facilitator roles was positive and validated our findings. Stakeholders indicated that roles and characteristics were understandable and meaningful. They commented that understanding the key role and skills of each type of facilitator, and whether training was required, was useful in hiring processes.

A key goal and responsibility in all nine facilitator roles is to drive and motivate a practice change and to act as a resource for making the change. Overall, facilitator roles included attributes and skills such as credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, enthusiasm and good problem-solving and networking skills. Opinion leaders, coaches, champions, research facilitators and clinical/practice facilitators all work internally (locally) within the organisation. Two main features of opinion leaders as facilitators are: they are peer nominated and they are informal leaders who are influential because they are knowledgeable and experienced.

Opinion leadership stems from medical literature and is based on diffusion of innovation and social influence theory. Opinion leaders have wide interpersonal communication networks and therefore have a key role in assisting others to recognise the need for improvement and communicating information about innovation within professional networks. Coaching has been used in the business/management literature as an approach to training, and more recently has been theoretically positioned in the context of EBP as a relational approach. A coach assists others with making a change particularly in guiding their learning during implementation using motivation, encouragement and positive reinforcement. A champion, whose role is also based on diffusion of innovation and social influence theory, is a local visionary who uses expert knowledge and vision to persuade others to adopt an innovation; and help others to see the advantages of making a practice change and mentor them through the process.

Research facilitators, clinical/practice facilitators, outreach facilitators, linking agents, knowledge brokers and external/internal facilitators were considered more formally appointed roles, and the majority of these facilitators were typically trained for their role. Research facilitators, described in the context of EBP, have expertise (research, clinical background) to support staff to strengthen their research skills, knowledge and participation in research in a clinical setting. A clinical/practice facilitator, also described in the context of EBP (eg, guideline implementation), provides ongoing education and support through the implementation process (though some were external). Facilitator roles considered external to the organisation included outreach facilitators, linking agents and...
knowledge brokers (the latter two being boundary spanner roles). An outreach facilitator assists healthcare providers (eg, those in primary care practices) through a formal implementation process (eg, using educational outreach visits/academic detailing/quality improvement). A clinical/practice facilitator or outreach facilitator role may be useful when staff are required to learn new skills for research implementation. The linking facilitator role may be useful when staff are required to work—described as external facilitators (eg, research external-internal facilitators based on the PARiHS framework).

### Characteristics of facilitation

Within our sample of 195 articles, there were 133 articles from which we identified 15 characteristics of facilitation.

#### Table 4  Results: Definitions of facilitation

| First author/year | Definition of facilitation                                                                 | Number of citations |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Kitson (2008, 1998) | Facilitation is a ‘technique by which one person makes things easier for others’ (p 152). ‘The term describes the type of support required to help people change their attitudes, habits, skills, ways of thinking, and working.’ (p 152) | 19                  |
| Harvey (2002)     | Facilitation refers to ‘the process of enabling (making easier) the implementation of evidence into practice’ (p 579). ‘Facilitation is achieved by an individual carrying out a specific role (a facilitator), which aims to help others.’ (p 579) | 0                   |
| Bashir (2000)     | ‘Facilitation uses personal contact between the facilitator and the professional to encourage good practice and better service organisation.’ (p 626) | 0                   |
| Schwartz (2002)   | ‘A process of enabling individuals, groups, or teams to work effectively together to achieve a common goal.’ (cited in ref 18, p 296) | 1                   |
| Ferguson (2004)   | ‘Facilitation involves helping others to identify questions of practice; providing support to enable others to meet specific goals, including research use; attending to the process of achieving those goals; and knowing the system in which change is proposed and implemented.’ (p 325) | 0                   |
| Lekalakala-Mokgele (2005) | ‘Facilitation is both a method and a strategy for learning. Facilitation promotes critical thinking in the learners and both become reflective learners.’ (p 25) | 0                   |
| Stetler (2006)    | ‘Facilitation is a deliberate and valued process of interactive problem solving and support that occurs in the context of a recognized need for improvement and a supportive interpersonal relationship. Facilitation is primarily a distinct role with a number of potentially crucial behaviors and activities.’ (Abstract paragraph 4) | 4                   |
| Petrova (2010)    | ‘Facilitation is the process of providing support to individuals or groups to achieve beneficial change’ (p 38). It has been described as ‘the provision of opportunity, resources, encouragement and support for the group to succeed in achieving its own objectives and to do this through enabling the group to take control and responsibility for the way they proceed.’ (p 38) | 1                   |
| Dogherty (2010)   | ‘Facilitation is viewed as both an individual role as well as a process involving individuals and groups.’ (p 86) | 3                   |

Only the opinion leader role was described as informal (with no training required).

Of the 63 intervention studies, 24 identified training facilitators. Seventeen of these 24 studies described training components, with nine studies including length of training, ranging from 4 hours, 107 40 hours, 118 1–3 days, 68 102 127–139 to 6–7.5 months. Training components typically included coursework (theoretical knowledge), 37 47 102 119 120 or both course work and practical experience (skills training). 32 48 106 118 137–139

In a recent article describing the i-PARiHS framework, Kitson and Harvey outline facilitator activities, and further identify three distinct facilitator roles: novice, experienced and expert facilitator. For example, the novice facilitator is skilled at clarifying tasks, and identifying key stakeholders; experienced facilitators support novices, assess system-wide activities and contextual issues, and develop skills in sustaining change; expert facilitators are positioned at a strategic level to provide project coordination and leadership for the initiative, and includes engaging stakeholders and political negotiation skills.
associated with research use by healthcare providers, and mapped these onto Rogers’ five attributes of innovation: (1) relative advantage (four characteristics), (2) compatibility (four characteristics), (3) complexity (four characteristics), (4) trialability (one characteristic) and (5) observability (two characteristics). Each of these attributes is described next and shown in Table 3.

Relative advantage
Relative advantage is one of the strongest predictors of successful implementation and an innovation’s adoption rate, and was the most frequently cited attribute of facilitation in our review. The relative advantage or benefit of facilitation is that it involves a process for making change easier for others. We found four characteristics of facilitation considered advantageous to those involved in implementing research into practice: (1) encourages assessment of current practice; (2) presents ideas to others; (3) creates useful communication networks; and (4) provides support and resources to achieve goals. A facilitator can help healthcare professionals to identify gaps between knowledge and practice, and to acknowledge the need for improvement. Facilitators can assist others to understand the relative advantage of making a change, as well as the benefit of facilitation as an implementation innovation itself. A facilitator provides continuing support and identifies resources to help with the process, and monitors the change. For example, a facilitator builds organisational support for new practices and provides structure for learning.

Compatibility
A key purpose of facilitation is to make change more compatible with existing practices. Several characteristics of facilitation promote compatibility of the change with existing practice including: mobilising existing knowledge and skills; enhancing staff readiness to change and empowering staff; supporting a culture for change; and tailoring facilitation activities to local context (eg, social, cultural). For example, a facilitator understands the climate and practical realities of the organisation, and frames knowledge so that it is relevant to staff practice.

Complexity
Facilitation supports the development of new knowledge and skills, requires facilitators to be trained or have experience with this role, may have multiple components, and is described as a bidirectional process that fosters relationship building. A complex intervention typically contains several interacting components. Most intervention studies in this review described a single intervention but interventions tended to be multifaceted, with several components or strategies typically delivered by a facilitator (eg, audit and feedback, consensus building). Eleven studies used multiple interventions (ie, more than one intervention arm), for example, reminders and a nurse facilitator; and opinion leader education and audit and feedback. However, facilitation as an innovation need not be complex. Facilitation is an enabling approach that can help reduce the (perceived or actual) complexity of a multifaceted intervention. Facilitation involves building trust and fostering mutual opportunities. Facilitators are experienced or are trained for their role to support others with implementation. The frequency and duration (dose) of facilitation varies; for example, some studies included daily facilitation for 3 months, monthly for 12 months, and on average 25 visits per site lasting 1 hour for 18 months.

Observability
Observability is seeing the results of an innovation, in our case being able to ascertain that individuals use research as a result of facilitation. Two characteristics of facilitation that reflected observability were facilitators encouraging others to role model the change and reinforcing the change (research use) and supporting sustainability. Some examples of role modelling included sharing examples of good practice and providing opportunities for formal shadowing. An example of reinforcing the change was a follow-up visit by a nurse facilitator to reinforce guideline implementation.

Facilitation process
Although facilitation is identified in the literature as a process of enabling implementation of evidence into practice, few studies identified the actual process. Dogherty and colleagues outlined four stages of facilitation that include activities to facilitate research use in nursing: (1) planning for change, (2) leading and managing change, (3) monitoring progress and ongoing implementation, and (4) evaluating change. Elnitsky and colleagues described an internal facilitation process (within the organisation): learning the role of facilitator, assessing the culture, facilitating external programmes, negotiating and getting buy-in. They mapped this process to Dogherty and colleagues’ facilitation taxonomy (above) and subdomains of the PARiHS framework. Others have described facilitation as an interactive problem-solving process requiring supportive interpersonal relationships. Dogherty and colleagues described key factors to successful facilitation of EBP such as...
as development of strategic partnerships, use of multiple strategies to effect change, and facilitator characteristics and approach (eg, leadership and team building skills). Barriers influencing the facilitation process were largely contextual constraints such as lack of engagement and resources and team functioning.

**DISCUSSION**

Our review suggests that facilitation has become an important aspect of implementing research into practice, and has potential to be an effective innovation. Our literature synthesis advances previous reviews on facilitation by broadening our understanding of the roles of facilitators and the characteristics of facilitation. Our first research question addressed the key facilitator roles identified in the literature. We identified nine types of facilitator roles, the majority of which are formal appointed roles. Facilitators share a common goal of implementing an EBP change, and some roles share theoretical underpinnings—opinion leaders and champion roles are based on diffusion of innovation and social influence theory, and a linking agent and knowledge broker act as intermediaries/boundary spanners to bridge gaps. However, we have also highlighted some notable differences in these roles. Clearly, many facilitator roles are being used in healthcare systems. Our findings shed light on the variety, complexity and need for these roles. Policymakers can use these findings to design role statements and processes to impact outcomes for care providers and patients. Knowing the various types of facilitator roles can assist administrators and managers to implement a facilitator role that best supports change activities in their setting. For example, an outreach facilitator could be potentially useful in settings such as outpouch nursing and home care. Boundary spanner facilitator roles may be most useful to bridge practitioners with internal and external stakeholders involved in planned change. The importance of external facilitators supporting internal facilitators in creating organisational facilitation capacity is highlighted in the literature. Building internal facilitation capacity may create sustainable infrastructures to support implementation activities designed for improving patient safety and quality of care delivery. Further research should be undertaken on external-internal facilitator roles as they may foster a more integrated approach to facilitating the use of research into practice.

Our second research question addressed the characteristics of facilitation that contribute to research use by healthcare professionals. Characteristics of facilitation are important because they identify those features that may potentially lead to greater success in implementing change. In the KT literature, the knowledge itself is typically considered the innovation. Studies have shown that facilitation itself should be operationalised as an innovation or tool used to influence implementation of other innovations (eg, guideline implementation via facilitation). Using Rogers’ framework enabled us to highlight characteristics of facilitation that may influence its adoption as an innovation. Relative advantage was the most frequently cited attribute of facilitation in our review. Rogers’ attributes of an innovation covered all of the results that we found and therefore it is confirmed to be a comprehensive model to describe characteristics of an innovation.

Further research could examine whether facilitation strategies with Rogers’ innovation attributes lead to successful implementation. For example, facilitation that is tailored to local context and offers ongoing support may be better received than a complex intervention. According to Greenhalgh et al, Rogers’ concept of reinvention (innovation adaptability) can be considered another innovation attribute that could lead to innovations being adopted more readily. Though we did not include the concept reinvention in our data analysis, three articles from our review described reinvention of the innovation as an important quality to enhance adoption. For example, Miller et al suggested designing a KT intervention with reinvention in mind, which involves knowing the attributes of the intervention that must be maintained for effectiveness, this is important for adoption and sustainability of an innovation. Facilitators can assist with reinvention during implementation to individualise the innovation to better meet adopters’ needs. Reinvention as an attribute of an innovation could be explored in future reviews. Understanding these innovation attributes can lay the groundwork for well-designed and well-evaluated facilitation interventions to improve practice in healthcare delivery. However, we noted key gaps in the literature on the characteristics of facilitation. First, the process of facilitation remains unclear and largely implicit, which challenges descriptions of facilitation interventions for future study. Second, few studies were conducted in home care and long-term care settings, which is important to address as Canada and other countries are experiencing a shift in population demographics towards an ageing generation.

Two main limitations of our review, which may introduce the potential for publication bias, are that we did not include grey literature, nor did we conduct a quality appraisal of included studies as this is not part of a scoping study under-taking nor the purpose of our review. The scoping review enabled us to synthesise a breadth of literature that characterises the quantity, nature and extent of research evidence on facilitation and the roles undertaken to facilitate the uptake of evidence. Our search was further restricted to the English language. However, we tracked non-English language studies and could have included four of them. Our review was focused on research use specifically among healthcare professionals, which has a considerable body of literature that theorises, conceptualises and operationalises facilitation. While this diversity creates some inconsistencies in naming facilitator roles, it has a notable strength; the diversity of the disciplines that describe facilitator roles and characteristics of facilitation from various theoretical perspectives helps us to better understand facilitation.
CONCLUSION
This scoping review highlights a diverse and broad literature on the concept of facilitation that can expand our current thinking about facilitation as an innovation and its potential to support an integrated, collaborative approach to improving healthcare delivery. Implementing research into practice to improve patient care is complex and requires dedicated facilitators to support the change process. This scoping review advances the field of KT science by contributing to the evidence base needed to develop measures of facilitation and to design and test facilitation interventions for successful research use.

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Contributors CAE and LAC conceived of the study and secured funding for the study. LAC and FT screened search results for inclusion and extracted data from included articles. CAE conceived of the data analysis framework. LAC, GGC and FT collaboratively drafted the manuscript. All authors provided critical comments on the manuscript. CC (contributor) assisted with the stakeholder consultation.

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