Using Network Analysis to Understand and Advance Falls Prevention Referral Pathways

Objectives:
The purpose of this study was to understand the referral linkages that exist among falls prevention agencies in a southern Ontario region using network analysis theory. Limited research studies have been conducted on referral pathways of public health programs and no studies to date have investigated falls prevention referral pathways using network analysis.

Methods:
This was a single case study which included fifteen individual interviews. The participants included professionals in the areas of health promotion, long-term care, acute care, paramedicine, and allied health. The data was analyzed through the constant comparative approach.

Results:
Ten themes emerged and were classified into internal and external factors influencing the falls prevention referral pathways. Themes associated with internal factors are: 1) health professionals initiating services; 2) communication strategies; 3) formal partnerships; 4) trust; 5) program awareness; and 6) referral policies. Themes associated with external factors are: 1) client characteristics; 2) primary and community care collaboration; 3) networking; and 4) funding.

Conclusions:
The study outlined the benefit of using network analysis to understand falls prevention referral pathways and that trust and strong communication among health professionals are the main factors that facilitate referrals. Recommended referral tools (i.e., standardized referral form, electronic program database, centralized system) supports the referral facilitation process.

What are the implications of your research on practice or policy?
Practice implications include recommended referral tools as mentioned in the conclusions section and a client feedback loop. This feedback loop includes: 1) health professionals facilitating referrals for clients, 2) clients receive the falls prevention services, 3) clients provide feedback on their experiences, and 4) health professionals would use their feedback to judge whether additional referrals would be facilitated to those programs in the future. It is important to note that there are factors that impact each juncture of this client feedback and referral pathway model. The client feedback model allows health professionals to seamlessly facilitate falls prevention referrals.