When does training become learning?
Reflections about transmitting ideas across borders

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Abstract

This paper starts with summarising research conducted in London, England. It draws on the author’s experience as a senior civil servant inside the London Metropolitan Police Service managing analytics and evidence for performance and evaluation. Part of that analytic work included a ten-year study of the outcome of rape allegations (eight years were tracked during this decade), and whether and how that research found its way into the conversations within the organisation about how to police/investigate rape and sexual assault (see Williams and Stanko 2015). This work has served as a core part of the evidence base underpinning the co-production of a new police training course for sexual assault liaison officers. To consider sharing the practice of police training across borders, the role of academic research evidence in the preparation of training necessarily raises questions about the core messages of police ‘training’ police and how improvement in the policing of sexual assault evolves for one of policing’s wicked problems. As the 2016 CEPOL conference focused on ‘Global Trends in Law Enforcement Training and Education’, the reflections about the process of co-production of training locally and across borders are discussed here.

Introduction

Research confirms that few allegations of rape are reported to police. Even fewer rape allegations reach court, and even fewer still result in convictions of the alleged suspect. This outcome in terms of justice is replicated throughout the world. Characterised as the ‘justice gap’ (see for instance Horvath and Brown 2009), the process of investigating rape allegations was the subject of a ten-year inquiry inside the London Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). Two full months’ data in 2012 was the focus of more detailed analysis (Hohl and Stanko 2015). This analysis showed that victim withdrawal accounts for almost half of the attrition of the 587 sample cases studied. The next largest contribution to attrition is the police decision to take no further action, accounting for 67% of attrition in non-withdrawn allegations. These decisions are rarely scrutinised by anyone outside of policing. Analysis shows that there are three critical factors present in decisions to proceed in the police recorded allegation data: the availability of independent evidence of the incident, the identification of a suspect who is a ‘credible criminal’, and the assessment that a complainant is ‘credible’ strengthen the likelihood that an allegation will result in a charge by the Crown Prosecution Service.

The above findings were cited in a commissioned enquiry into the policing of rape allegations in London (Angiolini 2015), and this enquiry concluded that there was a compelling case for improvement in the police management of rape and sexual assault. The Angio-
Legal and global trends in law enforcement training and education

**Police training**

The purpose of the 2016 CEPOL conference was to consider global trends in law enforcement training and education. Much of the conversation at the conference about improvement in policing has recognised the importance of learning the lessons from evidence based policing literature and folding academic research into policing training and education. There was a consensus at the conference that this aspiration was very much in the beginning stage of the journey, and that there was limited progress to date.

In this paper, I share insight about the process of creating a new approach to improve the business of sexual assault liaison officer training informed by research evidence published in 2015 on the London study of rape allegations (see Hohl and Stanko 2015). The lessons learnt from the academic-police collaboration’s creation of a new training course for use in the two partner forces, can be shared with other police forces at home (1), in the UK and abroad. Using the lens of this PKF project, the paper is reflective, and raises a number of questions about the current generic approach to police training, not only in England and Wales (home), but abroad as well. I suggest that in order for innovative, evidence infused police training to be understood and relevant, there must be a broad alignment of what is considered to be ‘good policing’ or ‘good enough policing’ (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2016; Bowling, 2007) shared across borders. These reflections here will largely focus on the grounding of ‘what is meant by good training’ or ‘good enough’ training, so that policing is better (after all, that is the purpose of training — improving professionalism). This explicitly means that somehow — and over time — the impact of the training should be able to be measured, transparent, and experienced by victims who report sexual assault as ‘good enough’. I am purposely choosing one of the biggest challenges to policing across the globe — the response to reports of sexual assault — which universally are criticised as ‘not good enough’. The paper draws on learning from a police-academic collaboration funded through the UK’s PKF which has translated academic research on the policing response to rape to a new training programme designed for sexual assault liaison police officers in two forces in England.

Sexual assault liaison policing is a specialist role inside the police service in England and Wales. As a role it differs among the forty-four police forces. Some of the roles combine support with sexual assault investigation; other forces separate support for the victim as a function from the investigating officers’ role. So even with England and Wales, the approach to the policing role and its place overall in the policing of sexual assault differs and ‘training’ officers for this role is largely in-house. For the purposes of discussion, police training approaches should be compatible with national training standards set by the CoP. The sexual assault police officer training modules abide by learning objectives specified by the CoP, but these do not yet require that the specific information within any module align with the available (best) evidence according to academic standards. As preparation of any training delivered to

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1 Home would be England, and in particular, the London Metropolitan Police.
officers desiring a new role is largely undertaken by training units within individual police forces, the ‘evidence’ basis for what an officer ‘does’ and how s/he ‘does it’ is largely managed through a craft-based skill development. A distinction between craft-based and science-based skill development has been addressed by Willis (2013). He suggests that science-based (or even science-informed) approaches are less prevalent.

Police officer trainers who train police officers for new roles access first their own experience as police officers ‘doing the role’ to inform the substance of the ways of working they wish to train other police officer to do. They further draw on knowledge about the local, social, legal and organisational context for ‘best practice’ from their operational experience. Police trainers too rely on ‘command and control’ to provide an invisible funnel through which new information is assimilated into police action. ‘This is the way we do things around here.’ Developing a lesson plan on what constitutes a problem (here how to provide the liaison between the victim and the investigation of a sexual assault) and to manage it (as police action, process and procedure) is constructed through the lens of organisational process. Telling trainees ‘what to do’ turns the job into using process as the anchor for deciding how to respond to a situation, event or report of a crime. Police training, as I have come to understand first hand, is largely overshadowed by force process and procedure, an invisible institutional framework to exclude knowledge that is generated outside policing itself. Yet individual police officers (who are providing vital support to sexual assault victims) are continuously confronted by having to make informed (and defensible) decisions about very complex situations (and as time goes on, academic evidence informed decisions which may — or may likely — clash with institutional practice). Routinely accounting for how policing decisions are made (when, why and often, under some form of supervision) invisibly underpins the training. ‘We need to help officers tell the investigating officer that s/he is wrong?’ but with a form of hopelessness that such attempts are not always successful. The training unit, I have come to learn through working with both police partners, is not routinely informed by the police force’s routine way of accounting for its success in its business (for instance, a look at the overall performance of the police force for rape allegations for instance or understanding how responding to rape allegations rarely result in any criminal justice outcome might require some reflection about what they are asking officers to do). There is — at least in these training units — no internal in-house feedback loop to assess whether what the police trainers are training officers to do ‘works’, or makes any difference in the performance of a police force in terms of delivering ‘good enough policing.’ To become more professional I suggest requires policing to be better customers of their training units (2).

Police training has been staffed largely by police officers who bring with them a view about ‘the way things work in policing and particularly here’. Trainers — at least those in England and Wales — undergo certification in order to become ‘trained trainers’, a certification which demonstrates that the new trainer understands how adults learn (craft). The approach recognises the handing down the craft from one officer to another, and often relies on tacit knowledge (not academic knowledge) to share good practice. Professional skill development — especially for police officers seeking to learn a different role — then takes place inside policing, and as studies of policing and police culture consistently find, rests on information that is largely sealed away from any other eyes (and particularly independent academic evidence). The approaches and techniques that are being handed down have rarely been tested, are not challenged by those outside the police, least of all from academic research, because the world of in-house training is largely hermeneutically sealed to outside eyes and ears.

There is much expectation about the power of training overcoming shortcomings of current police practice with regard to improving the experience of victims and the outcomes of allegations in the criminal justice system. Police training on sexual assault and for sexual assault liaison officers has commonly been part of the recommendations for improving the policing of rape and sexual assault. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary has published a number of reports over the past two decades, and improving the justice outcomes for rape allegations has been linked to more training. My experience in this project is that recommendations should be linked to ‘better or improved’ training. The role of sexual assault liaison officer is created to improve the two key contributions to attrition (see for instance Angiolini 2015): the high levels of victim withdrawals and improving the investigating officer’s investigation in order to become ‘trained trainers’, a certification which demonstrates that the new trainer understands how adults learn (craft). The approach recognises the handing down the craft from one officer to another, and often relies on tacit knowledge (not academic knowledge) to share good practice. Professional skill development — especially for police officers seeking to learn a different role — then takes place inside policing, and as studies of policing and police culture consistently find, rests on information that is largely sealed away from any other eyes (and particularly independent academic evidence). The approaches and techniques that are being handed down have rarely been tested, are not challenged by those outside the police, least of all from academic research, because the world of in-house training is largely hermeneutically sealed to outside eyes and ears.

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(2) Some police functions have been under scrutiny more than others. Take shooting in the USA or public order in the UK. It would be worth a better understanding of how this kind of craft training is done, and how ‘what works’ informs the approach to police training in these scenarios.
tion. The theory of change underpinning this project is that better evidence informed training (officers attuned and better informed about victim vulnerabilities and the implications for criminal investigations) would strengthen (or at least align) police training with improving the justice outcomes of rape allegations. This should be further tested (if the training can be delivered).

**A review of sexual assault liaison officer training**

The PKF project’s theory of change draws on what the research evidence says about what contributes to victim outcomes for rape allegations. The research (Hohl and Stanko 2015) highlights the vulnerabilities of victims through an analysis of allegations reported to the local police force, and demonstrates the influence of these vulnerabilities on outcomes. The new course set out to develop explicitly an appreciative inquiry approach to putting victim vulnerability at the heart of sexual liaison police officer training and requires the trainees to think differently in order to make decisions informed by victim need. Although only a partial ‘fix’ to whole system improvement in the investigation of rape allegation (there needs to be more work regarding the interviewing skills of officers who are after all interviewing highly vulnerable victims), the project provided new insight into the process of academic-police collaboration on police training in general.

The number of recorded rape allegations in England and Wales in 2015/6 has risen by 123 percent since 2011/12, with the number of convictions in court decreasing by half (7.5 percent of recorded rape allegations) (RMG, HMIC 2016). The biggest contribution to attrition is victim disengagement/withdrawal. As police investigation is the next largest contributor to attrition (when the victim stays with the criminal justice process), better training and supervision are named as critical factors in improving outcomes for victims. Keeping training in-house, without the contribution of outsider academic or practitioner knowledge, has not resulted in the level of improvement needed to address the issues outside scrutiny in England and Wales continuously finds. The academic research evidence (Hohl and Stanko 2015) as well as the Angiolini Review (2015) points to key areas for improvement.

The PKF project, which academic-police officers co-produced a new police training package for Sexual Assault Liaison Officers, opened the discussion in the two forces’ training units about how the needs of the complainant of rape and the needs of the investigation are often in tension. These are not fixed, and the training package needs to frame the new training through the lens of what the victim and criminal justice process ‘needs’ (which starts with the cooperation of the victim). Learning to balance these should be part of the core competency of the successfully trained specialist officer, the working group agreed. As the data in the police forces (which are the data used by the researchers), the needs of the complainant are framed by kinds of vulnerabilities complainants ‘bring with them’ when reporting a rape. As noted above, understanding the nature of these vulnerabilities should enable officers to prepare in advance how they will manage these vulnerabilities within the investigation window. These should be explicit as common issues officers will be managing in their roles. What we found in the discussions was what the researchers put in the foreground — victim vulnerability — the police trainers had previously put in the background — with legal definitions, process and procedures trumping the understanding of how vulnerability plays out in recorded allegations of rape. We debated how to introduce research-informed approaches, which contrasted with police trainers who draw on their own expertise as officers (even if this were the best craft knowledge possible) to carve the way the trainee officers learn their new roles.

**Co-producing sexual assault liaison officer training**

The PKF project set out to work with two different police forces. Working with two forces though meant that there were two different approaches to the policing roles which supported victims and led investigations, and thus there were different in-house training designs for that support. The project was keen to align the research evidence on the rape allegations that provided the bulk of the business for the forces. We agreed to two key changes to the previous training course that the working group agreed were critical to delivery. First there was the inclusion as a core part of the lesson plan of the use of case studies that reflected the kinds vulnerabilities those who allege rape in their own force have. Second, the training package addressed well-being needs of the police officers themselves, as officer
resilience is often stretched when working with victims with high vulnerabilities.

Simply the process took the following approach. The academic team played the role of critical friend, and the working group collaboration focused around key steps:

- The academic team reviewed the existing evidence base, interviewed officers serving in the roles; interviewed third sector victim support to document a seasoned outside perspective on ‘how the policing support’ works; and observed delivery of current course.

- Analysis and observations from above set the substance for critical reflections on the training with a core working group (from both forces, comprising trainers and operational officers).

- After a review of CoP competencies, the academic team proposed functional competencies for the role of sexual assault liaison officer and these were reviewed and revised with police partners.

- Academic team drafted the training drawing on their knowledge of the key learning to set the foundations for understanding the needs of victims based on the kinds of vulnerabilities reported in the force itself, a review of ‘what works in adult training (especially the role of reflexivity in professional development) and drafted the core classroom learning about rape and victim vulnerability. Most importantly, the working group discussed and designed in debates and reflections about what they concurred a sexual assault officer would do differently as a consequence of understanding these vulnerabilities.

- A consultant with recognised expertise drafted the police training package as resources were tight in both forces to produce a new approach using their own design teams.

- A drafted new training approach was peer reviewed by operational police officers.

- Both forces have pledged to use the new materials, harnessing the information on vulnerabilities reported to the local force as the case study materials.

The above process was resource intensive, involved continuous debate and discussion and required the confidence to challenge organisational issues in the police forces, such as arguing for the additional resources in order to change the ‘way we do things around here.’ This was an endeavour that required full time resources from part of the academic team, and involved a fair amount of robust discussions about change. In other words, it took a lot of effort to shift ‘the way we do things around here’.

There is more work to be done to monitor and to assess whether this new approach to sexual assault liaison training (one that translates the needs of the victims in a different and new way than has been done in the past) makes any difference to justice outcomes (or to the way rape victims feel about their treatment by police) in two ways: whether victims feel supported differently (and some measurement for this may be a fall in withdrawal from police contact) and whether police officers feel they are better prepared and more resilient as a result of the training course (do officers themselves feel more confident and/or resilient as a consequence). Over time (it will take a few years) it would be possible to measure whether there is any change in the number and proportion of allegations that result in a criminal justice outcome. It is also important to review whether this is the right measure of success. At the same time, it might be possible to introduce an exit interview for as many victims as possible. (The author has tried this before inside a police force, it proved difficult to capture the views of those victims who chose to disengage with the police.) It would also be possible to measure the impact on police officers who serve in the role as sexual assault liaison officers. It is important, however, to map a theory of change for the training course, and set out systematically to measure and to monitor whether this approach contributes to the kinds of improvement proposed by various external reports over the past two decades.

The above process — incorporating what we know about the victims of rape and sexual assault, what we know about what works in training, what we know about how police officers’ role as sexual assault liaison officers impact their well-being to name a few — and to collaborate with two different police forces with two different ways of working is labour intensive. There are high level lessons which we can share across borders, but what it does tell us is that ‘evidence-informed training’ — in an arena that is largely an evidence free zone

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— is in its infancy as a process of changing policing. To adapt learning from the lessons of changing police training in the above example to that of the contexts of policing across borders is, I suggest, a very tall order.

**Some thoughts about sharing the above process across borders**

There is a growing consensus that a core value at the heart of policing is its legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. I have crossed many national borders speaking about my research, work in the Metropolitan Police London and sometimes delivering training to police officers about the impact of police decision-making on justice outcomes for rape and sexual assault allegations. This paper is as much a reflection from working inside my own organisation (see Williams and Stanko 2018) as it was across continents. In this last section, I would like to talk about why some of these presentations abroad end up with mixed receptions, at times with police becoming defensive about ‘how hard their job is’ or surprised that an evidence base might serve as grounded information for change, and me becoming frustrated about police practice that is ‘not good enough’ and not seen to be heading in the direction of improvement (as measured both by an increase in justice outcomes for victims who approach police with an allegation of rape and sexual assault and how victims feel). Academic research gives us some of these clues as to what is hiding behind each cross-border encounter. Rape myths continue to infiltrate the processes and practices of police decision-making (see Horvath and Brown 2009; Hohl and Stanko 2015). Yet, I believe the persistence of rape myths influencing practice doesn’t quite account for the growing understanding among policing colleagues that there are real problems in the management of victims’ rape allegations in many police services across the world. I would like to make three points about the link between training and learning.

1. There are substantial challenges in police handling of rape allegations across the globe. My research suggests that in particular training for improvement in the police investigation of sexual assault requires an understanding of victim vulnerabilities and how this impacts (a) rape victims and (b) the way police approach an investigation as a consequence. Discussions about policing sexual assault — recognised as one of the main issues facing women around the world and a growing recognition of a factor in the abuse of men — are swamped by concentrating on ‘how difficult’ victims or their situations are, and therefore, bringing these kinds of complaints to the justice sector is fraught with ‘mess’ (see the most recent inquiry in London, Angiolini 2015 as an example). While there is much to share and to learn between police services, finding ‘common ground’ is problematic because jurisdictional police processes and procedures have such a prominent role in the thinking about ‘what police do’. These procedural and legal traditions differ across jurisdictions and interfere in the ability to start any conversation about police training using the evidence — the analysis of who reports what — as the starting point for thinking differently about training differently in any local context. What I learned after a decade and a half inside the Metropolitan Police was that the issues undermining better justice outcomes could be and should be linked to an analytic grounding in the voices of victims who are already engaging (or are trying to engage) with police by reporting rape and sexual assault. A knowledge of what the law says about what constitutes rape and sexual assault is clearly presumed. Where a training session rarely starts is with a clear analysis — an evidence grounded review — of what the victims are telling police locally about the problem of sexual assault victims face. What are the circumstances presented by those who are reported sexually assault or rape and how do these circumstances challenge the application of law? This complexity can be analysed, but it involves active analytics inside a police service exploring the impact of reported victimisation on the demand of the police service to apply its legal powers. What most police services will admit is that many of the victim know their offenders, and the circumstances of applying law requires unpicking tricky issues of consent, force and exploitation of vulnerability. For forces using practitioner trainers, a focus on applying procedure and law doesn’t help steer trainees’ skills toward gathering (best) evidence of what happened and how that evidence might demonstrate a violation of law. The bulk of cases coming to police attention will be ‘messy’, not straightforward application of law. The impact of ‘messy’ cases on high demand for limited resources requires far more attention and time, and in the age of austerity, often causes frustration and/or officers’ stress and burn-out inside policing. The ability to train police officers across borders
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requires police officers to acknowledge the business they manage (‘messy cases’), learn how to manage ‘messiness’ differently from insights using scholarly research on victims’ vulnerability, adapt the learning to enable officers to understand the business of sexual assault allegations and apply their practice and problem solving skills to the kinds of rape allegations that actually are reported to their local police service.

The ten year monitoring project in the Metropolitan Police Service I oversaw taught me that the overwhelming majority of rape allegations are not be considered ‘good enough’ rape allegations deserving of robust investigation (Hohl and Stanko 2015). And that just over half of these London victims turn away from justice after they contacted police. There is academic research that tells us why this might be happening, but not what to do differently as a consequence of knowing this. This does not mean that the rape allegations reported by those victims who disengage with police are unfounded; it does tell us a lot about the majority of these victims who are highly vulnerable at the time of the assault. These incidents deserve much more understanding so that we might improve victims’ experience and their strength to challenge the assailant that did ‘something’ to them. If the UK has learned anything in the past two years from the scandals of historical sexual abuse allegations is that few victims were treated seriously, felt that they were disbelieved or had the strength to push back against ‘rape myths’ seeping into their exchanges with authorities. Linking police training — at home or abroad — with an analysis of the situations and victim who report rape allegations locally requires the police services — as ‘good enough’ — to know their business first (and consequently the business needs of those who turn to police for help). Police training should first and foremost be leaders in this business.

2. There is a challenge in shifting police training across the globe to shape the thinking of recruit and specialist officers drawing on science (academic) informed practice rather than craft-based practice (police officer training police officers using experiential and procedural expertise). There is slow traction in the use of evidenced based policing practice and this is also true of the use of evidence (science) informed training.

I ask the reader to reflect on debates about evidence based policing in an international context. Sharing a new idea (for instance, a co-produced (police/academic partners) syllabus and course material for a police training course to improve the experience of sexual assault victims) across borders must have some grounding in the ‘local’. It is difficult to share the ideas about the use of advanced analytics within a police service when it is not standard practice. Furthermore, advanced analytics — as resources for police tactics to address crime — are not commonly used in grounding training improvements. Evidence based policing approaches are more likely to be associated with deployment or response tactics, not those for the treatment of victims and the collection of evidence from traumatised or highly vulnerable victims, or placed at the heart of the police force’s own understanding of ‘how well are we doing’. When I ask a police service if they can share their data on the kinds of victims who report rape using a robust analysis of their own crime data, I often get silence. I have rarely found a police organisation that understands its crime reports for the purpose of tracking outcomes of police decisions, understanding vulnerable victim needs or suspect danger and does so routinely so that it can feed into ‘performance’ diagnostics as well as consider the way in which this information can be shared with officers investigating cases and training those to investigate cases. Police training is based on what police trainers believe to be the legal evidential problems of sexual assault, with trainers drawing on their experience of doing the job themselves. The training is overshadowed largely by process and procedures dictating how investigation is recorded (forms, supervision, gathering evidence and interviewing skills), but rarely informed by analytic understanding of the problem of rape/sexual assault in their local jurisdiction (using the data held within the police force itself). Without this analytic understanding (I would term it evidence informed), local police processes and procedures — the dominant topics for police training — are introduced without fundamentally challenging the kind of business police officers manage. In police speak it is not just knowing about the ‘problem profile’ of the issue that needs trained officers to respond to. It is knowing the difficulty this ‘problem’ poses for caring for its victims and the very process of the investigation strategy. This is highly influenced by the academic findings of researchers in areas such as psychology, legal studies, child protection, and many other academic disciplines who have highlighted the impact of rape and sexual assault on victims for dec-
ades. For many (most) allegations of rape, the victim (and the context within which the alleged rape took place) is the site of and for the investigation. It is the very kind of crime that must benefit from fresh academic knowledge.

What I have learned from the PKF project is that local police training remains dominated by local process and procedure. Outcomes of decision-making — my example here has been the outcomes of rape and sexual assault local allegations — rarely drive the direction for improvement, not only for the police force, but for the substance of the police training modules. This is why the inclusion of academic evidence insight facilitates police training to move out of the revolving door of ‘the way we do things here.’ But to do so, police training must be more open and transparent about what it does to train police to do, how it trains them to do it, what academic insight it applies to the training, and how it demonstrates that policing is ‘good enough’ and getting better. The PKF project has led to the creation of a part of a new training module to improve support to sexual assault victims. Most of the effort was devoted to communication, my final point.

3. There remains a gulf between academic language (science informed) and practitioner language (craft informed), and this communication gap hinders the integration of ‘academic/outside the force’ knowledge into training/policing/procedures/understanding inside the police force.

I was asked to comment on how the accelerate ‘training into learning’. Of course, each writer will say that this is hard to do. It is. My advice is that you the reader — perhaps a police trainer yourself — need to facilitate the conversation. You need to be persistent and patient, and brave enough to find a way to systematically review and refresh training in light of operational business and academic insight. The process for translating must be an open and transparent one. This means that police forces should invite academics with subject matter expertise and expert operational practitioners to participate, to observe and to help transform training. The co-production of the content and the approach to the training will be uncomfortable and irritable at times. But it will need to be so in order to find common ground and a workable approach that reflects the best information that academic/scientific knowledge can offer, a more sophisticated way for adults to learn (outside of the command and control regime), a steer on ‘what to do next with the information’ and the practical skills officers’ need to apply the learning successfully. The space within which the police ‘train their own’ has tended to be a closed shop. Craft-based trainers dominate this space, and these training officers may have been out of operations for a long time. They may not have been the best practitioners either. Too often training is considered a ‘dead zone’, where officers who have grown weary of frontline work, or officers are burnt out and ‘need a rest’ or who can’t find a role in the rest of the organisation train others to do what they no longer wish to do. This is an unspoken problem, one that is seldom articulated as an organisational barrier to improvement.

All is not doom and gloom, however. The conference that this paper was presented is one form of activity that is promoting new learning. My sense from talking to many participants from many different countries is that no one is satisfied with where police training is at the moment in the use of academic learning or in its translation into policing practices. This shows there is a hunger to get better. I for one wish the pace of change would quicken.

References:


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