HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT

A ten minute guide

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Health Impact Assessment – a new approach

Health impact assessment (HIA) represents a new approach to the evaluation of social, economic and environmental policies, programmes and projects. Its importance has been strongly endorsed by the current government, it is a major recommendation in the Acheson report on inequalities in health and it is also recognised by Article 152 of the Amsterdam Treaty which calls for the European Union to examine the possible impact of major policies on health. As a result, HIA is now at the forefront of the public policy agenda.

This leaflet is designed for newcomers to HIA – to define what it is, what it aims to do, the key concepts and principles on which it is based and how it can be applied. Some suggestions for further reading are also included for those who want to know more.

What is health impact assessment?

HIA can be defined as

“The estimation of the effects of a specified action on the health of a defined population”

Its purpose is

- to assess the potential health impacts – positive and negative – of policies, programmes and projects; and
- to improve the quality of public policy decision making through recommendations to enhance predicted positive health impacts and minimise negative ones.

“We need to ensure that … the actions that flow from our policies will contribute to our goals of improving the health of the population and reducing inequality. So we have decided that major new government policies should be assessed for their impact on health.”

(Government White Paper: Saving Lives - Our Healthier Nation)

“Local decision makers must think about the effect which their policies have on health. An important part of this role will be to encourage all local agencies to make local health impact assessments when planning investment in, for example, amenities buildings or local communities and the location of services.”

(Government White Paper: Saving Lives - Our Healthier Nation)
What can HIA offer?

HIA’s strength lies in providing a tool which enables informed policy decisions to be made based on a valid assessment of their potential health impacts, at the same time adding health awareness to policy making at every level. In the longer term it has the potential to make concern for improving public health the norm and a routine part of all public policy development.

HIA has much in common with the more established environmental impact assessment and, although it draws on a number of traditional research methods, it is more than just a monitoring and evaluation tool. HIA aims to provide a practical framework for identifying health impacts and ways of addressing them. It is also based on a number of key principles:

Key principles of HIA
- a social model of health and well-being
- an explicit focus on equity and social justice
- a multidisciplinary, participatory approach
- the use of qualitative as well as quantitative evidence
- explicit values and openness to public scrutiny

A social model of health and well-being

HIA is based on a holistic, social model of health which recognises that the well-being of individuals and communities is determined by a wide range of economic, social and environmental influences as well as by heredity and health care:

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease.”

This definition is much broader than (but encompasses) the traditional medical model which defines health as freedom from disease which can be diagnosed clinically and is concerned primarily with treating symptoms rather than their underlying causes.

Health determinants
- biological factors, e.g. age, gender and ethnicity
- personal or family circumstances and lifestyles, e.g. education, income, employment, risk taking behaviour, diet, exercise, recreation and leisure
- the social environment, e.g. culture, social networks and community participation
- physical environment, e.g. air quality, housing, crime, civic design and transport
- public services, e.g. access to services and quality of services
An explicit focus on equity and social justice

HIA is also underpinned by an explicit value system focussing on equity and social justice. In this context, equity has a moral and ethical dimension resulting from avoidable and unjust differentials in health status:

“Equity is concerned with creating equal opportunities for health and with bringing health differentials down to the lowest possible level.”

A multidisciplinary, participatory approach

HIA is not the preserve of any one disciplinary group. Instead, it draws on the experience and expertise of a wide range of “stakeholders”, who are involved throughout the process. These may include professionals with knowledge relevant to the issues being addressed, key decision makers, relevant voluntary organisations and – perhaps most importantly – representatives of the communities whose lives will be affected by the policy.

The use of qualitative as well as quantitative evidence

HIA involves an evaluation of the quantitative, “scientific” evidence where it exists but also recognises the importance of more qualitative information. This may include the opinions, experience and expectations of those people most directly affected by public policies and tries to balance the various types of evidence.

Openness to public scrutiny

To be consistent with the focus on equity, HIA also aims to be transparent and open to public scrutiny throughout.

How can HIA be applied?

Ideally, HIA should be applied prospectively (before policy, programme or project implementation) to ensure that steps are taken, at the planning stage, to maximise positive health impacts and to minimise the negative effects. In practice it is not always possible to do this so HIA may also be carried out concurrently (during the implementation stage) or retrospectively (after it has finished) in order to inform the ongoing development of existing work.
At what level is HIA appropriate?

HIA can be undertaken in varying levels of detail – as a rapid process or a more in-depth study – depending on the resources available and it can be applied to policies, programmes or projects. It is a requirement or a strong recommendation that HIA is addressed in many current government initiatives. Recent examples include

- a HIA of globalisation on the population of London
- a prospective HIA of the regional transport strategy in Merseyside
- a rapid HIA of a “New Deal for Communities” programme bid in Southwark

HIA methodologies

There is no one definitive methodology for HIA although several “toolkits” are currently being developed. The Merseyside Guidelines or variations of them, provide perhaps the most widely used model in this country and have proved to be practical and sufficiently flexible to be adapted to a range of circumstances.

Further information

The following reports and websites may be of interest:

- Welsh Assembly: Developing health impact assessment in Wales - [http://www.wales.gov.uk/subihealth/content/keypubs/healthimpact/pdf/healthimp_e.pdf](http://www.wales.gov.uk/subihealth/content/keypubs/healthimpact/pdf/healthimp_e.pdf)
- The Merseyside Guidelines are available from Liverpool Public Health Observatory (tel. 0151 794 5570; fax 0151 794 5588; email obs@liv.ac.uk) – [http://www.liv.ac.uk/~mhb](http://www.liv.ac.uk/~mhb)

References
