Quantifying quality of life: Explaining the origins of Quality-Adjusted Life-Years (QALYs)

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PROJECT OUTLINE:
THE GOVERNANCE OF HEALTH

• Three-year project on role of experts in British health policy-making since 1948

• My strand: health economics (HE)
  • Origins and definitions: gap in history of HE
  • Emergence in the UK
  • Evolution and impact

• Aim: a more nuanced history of QALY and HE
  • Why/how QALYs chosen by policy-makers?
  • Excluded alternatives?
QALY: DEFINITIONS

• Cost-utility analysis: quality and quantity

• Quantifying the benefits/quality of life for X or Y patient following X or Y treatment

• Ranking health-related quality of life from 0 (death) to 1 (ideal health state)

• Quantifying value placed by individuals on different health states (via surveys of patients and doctors)
Klarman et al. (1968) as Quality of Life; Fanshel and Bush (1970); Rosser and Watts (1972); Zeckhauser and Shephard (1976); Weinstein and Stason (1977): ‘QALY’
Williams (1985)
WHY QALYs?

- Most cost-effective treatment for a patient?

- Which patient should be treated?

- Context in the 1970s of crisis:
  - Scarce resources vs growing demand for health

  © More efficient allocation

  © Economics becomes part of decision-making
ADOPTION BY POLICY MAKERS

• Helmet for motorcyclists (US Department of Health Education and Welfare Program Analysis 1966)

• Renal dialysis and transplantation (Normand, 1994)

• Hypertension (Weinstein and Stason, 1977)
ADOPTION BY POLICY MAKERS

“The [QALY] evolved from being a concept intelligible to and supported by only a small handful of economists, to being part of the day-to-day language of most health managers and policy makers and many clinicians” (Smee, 2005: 91-92)

• DH support to QALY research from 1970s
  • e.g. survey of valuation of health states

• Academics promoting QALY to 'sceptics'
• EOR register of cost-effectiveness
QALYS IN THE UK MEDIA IN LATE 1980s

Context of NHS spending crisis

Williams: “hospital dialysis should be restrained and total hip replacement expanded” (September 1986)

ITV This Week’s ‘Who Lives, Who Dies?’ (2 episodes in October 1986)

BBC Panorama bringing Alan Maynard and NHS consultants to debate on TV (February 1987)

Miriam Stoppard and Alan Maynard on the ‘Life and Death Game’ (June 1987)
ISSUES

- Output measurement?
- Whose willingness to pay?
- Ageism and racism? (Harris, 2005)
- £20,000 QALY threshold adequate? (Grosse, 2008)
ALTERNATIVES

• Healthy-Years Equivalents (HYEs) (Mehrez and Gafni, 1989): measurement stretching over whole path

• Saved-Young-Life-Equivalents (SAVE) (Nord, 2001)

• Sanctity of Life (Koch, 2000)

• Proceduralism (Daniels and Sabin, 1997; Mooney, 2004)
REFLECTIONS

• Early stage of research

• QALYs introduction: bringing some rationality to decision-making in NHS

• Next steps:
  • Relationship between Government / NHS / academia / think tanks?
  • Impact of QALY on allocation of resources? e.g. Stanton (1999) on renal dialysis scoring badly

• More data to be collected: archives and interviews
REFERENCES AND QUESTIONS


