

INTRODUCTION

What is a Health Impact Assessment?

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a “multidisciplinary process within which a range of evidence about the health effects of a proposal is considered in a structured framework. . .based on a broad model of health which proposes that economic, political, social, psychological, and environmental factors determine population health.”

Northern and York Public Health Observatory, 2001

Why use HIA?

- Influence decision-makers using a broad understanding of health and a wide range of evidence.
- Highlight potentially significant health impacts that are unknown, unrecognized or unexpected.
- Assess how proposals will affect all members of the community, particularly the most vulnerable.
- Facilitate inter-sectoral working and public participation in decision-making.
- Promote sustainable development, considering short and long-term impacts.
- Encourage a greater appreciation of public health in the policy-making process.

Examples of HIA questions:

- What are the potential health effects of a proposal to change sales tax revenue?
- Do state-funded after-school programs yield significant health benefits?
- What are the health consequences of the current set of agricultural subsidies?
- What elements of school site design are most cost-effective in encouraging physical activity?

What the critics say about health impact assessment

“Are you going to do the same thing to health that’s been done to the environment” [with long, costly, litigious environmental impact statements]?

Anonymous environmental affairs officer for a public utility

“Whether the public’s health will concretely benefit from implementation of HIA remains unknown...[it] could be a significant waste of money, time, and effort, in part because evidence of impacts is only one of many factors affecting implementation of policies. HIA might be an impediment to action if an emphasis on “evidence based policy” ends up precluding informed analysis of policies that cannot be studied as randomized trials or whose probable impact extends over a long timeframe.”

N Krieger, M Northridge, S Gruskin, M Quinn, D Kriebel, G

Davey Smith, M Bassett, D H Rehkopf, C Miller, and the HIA “promise and pitfalls” conference group. “Assessing health impact assessment: multidisciplinary and international perspectives.” J Epidemiol Comm Health 57:659-662, 2003.

“Health impact assessment is an intuitively appealing and simple concept. However, there is a gap between the objectives of health impact assessment (making predictions about future health impacts in order to change policy actions) and the methods currently adopted by practitioners. Exponents of prospective health impact assessment as it currently stands should be explicit about the limited evidence and uncertainty with which they are working. We believe that such limitations compromise predictions of impact to such an extent that the standard model of health impact assessment* should be abandoned.”

Parry J, Stevens A. “Prospective health impact assessment: pitfalls, problems, and possible ways forward. BMJ 323:1177-1182.

* “Standard health impact assessment” In Parry, Stevens defined as:

- Limited literature search, usually non-systematic
- Mostly reliant on routine data
- Quantification of impacts
- Participation of stakeholders, but sampling methods not rigorous

Principles & Values of Health Impact Assessment

- **Democracy** - the right of people to participate in the formulation of policies that affect their life, both directly and through elected decision-makers.
- **Equity** - the reduction of inequity that results from avoidable and unjust differences in health status between different peoples.

HIA assesses the distribution of impacts from a proposed policy or project with a particular reference to how the proposed policy or project will affect vulnerable people (in terms of age, gender, ethnic background and socio-economic status).
- **Sustainable development** - emphasizing that development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Sustainability means that both short and long term impacts are considered, along with the obvious and less obvious impacts.
- **Scientific and robust practice** - emphasizing that transparent, systematic and impartial processes are used, which utilize the best available evidence from different scientific disciplines and methodologies.
- **Holistic approach to health** - health is determined by a broad range of factors from all sectors of society.

Source: National Institutes for Health and Clinical Excellence

Discussion Questions

1. What are some examples of instances in which these principles and values might come into conflict with one another in policy analysis and policy making?
2. How will emphasis or de-emphasis of different principles and values shape how an HIA is conducted?
3. What are some checks and balances that can be instituted to assure that all these principles and values are respected in HIA?

Approaches to Health Impact Assessment

1. Quantitative/analytic
2. Participatory
3. Procedural

Quantitative/Analytic Approach

Aims:

- Specify the range, direction, and magnitude of potential health impacts of a policy or project on a population

Foundations

- Risk analysis
- Epidemiology
- Cost-effectiveness analysis

Strengths

- Lends itself to the comparison of alternatives;
- Apparent objectivity;
- Generally a relatively high level of legal defensibility (however, requisite assumptions and uncertainty in projections make it vulnerable to legal challenge by competing experts).

Limitations

- Can be highly time- and cost-intensive;
- Time, money, and data limitations often restrict its application to a consideration of single, unmixed, non-cumulative exposures and only one or a few outcomes;
- May be difficult for non-experts to interpret, evaluate and use.

Participatory Approach to HIA

Aims:

- Develop comprehensive policy and planning solutions to health problems by involving local government agencies, citizens' groups, and community organizations to build capacity and take concrete steps to address health problems;
- Facilitate community participation, esp. of stakeholders who are otherwise under-represented in policy-making process.

Foundations

- Draws heavily from the field of community-based health promotion as outlined in the Ottawa Charter on Health Promotion[35] and demonstrated in the World Health Organization's Healthy Cities Initiative

Strengths

- More process- rather than outcomes-oriented;
- Provides a valuable mechanism for public participation and the democratization of government decision-making;

Limitations

- Information generated may be given little legitimacy in some social contexts, for instance in a litigious legal system that puts a premium on quantitative "scientific" data;
- Not very replicable or testable;
- Comparisons between alternatives and with standards difficult since there are no common metrics;
- Issues may also arise about who legitimately represents the "community."

Procedural Approach

Aims:

- Comply with legal mandates to perform an impact assessment, putting a premium on efficiency;

Foundations

- Based on and often linked to environmental impact assessment
- Uses a mix of qualitative and quantitative methodologies that are considered standard, state-of-the-art in their respective fields;

Strengths

- Can be performed in a relatively transparent, reproducible manner with methods that are broadly disseminated and understood;

Limitations

- Bureaucratic imperatives may compromise analytic rigor, numbers may be used merely to give a patina of objectivity and expert sophistication;
- Extensive procedural assessments may be required merely to fulfill bureaucratic requirements, not because they yield information of value to decision-makers.

Refer to [Glossary of terms used in HIA](#)

Levels of Health Impact Assessment

The HIA methodology can be used at different depths of assessment that require various resource inputs. The level of assessment chosen depends on the context, time available, purpose of the HIA, and available resources. Three levels of HIA are described below.

Rapid:

- Provides a broad overview of possible health impacts.
- Could be used at early policy development stage or where limited time/resources are available.
- Involves collecting and analyzing existing data and researching previous HIAs.
- Usually carried out quickly (approximately 2-6 weeks), and with relatively minimal resources.

Intermediate:

- Provides more detailed information of possible health impacts.
- Most frequent HIA approach applied.
- Allows more thorough investigation of health impacts, increases reliability of impacts.
- Involves reviewing available evidence and any similar HIAs and collecting and analyzing new data.
- Lasts approximately 12 weeks.

Comprehensive:

- Provides comprehensive assessment of potential health impacts.
- Most robust definition of impacts, but least frequently used – the ‘Gold Standard’ of HIAs.
- Involves a review of available evidence and any similar HIAs.
- Involves collecting and analyzing new data using multiple methods and sources (quantitative and qualitative data including stakeholders’ opinions).

(Taylor & Blair-Stevens, 2002; European Policy Health Impact Assessment (EPHIA), 2004)

For more about different types of HIA see:

- Our website at: <http://www.ph.ucla.edu/hs/health-impact/whatishia.htm>
- And this peer-reviewed journal article: Cole BL, Shimkhada R, Fielding JE, Kominski G, Morgenstern H. 2005. Methodologies for realizing the potential of health impact assessment. American Journal of Preventive Medicine 28(4):382-389.

What does a completed HIA look like?

1. **Comprehensive HIA report:** Table of contents for “HIA of California Proposition 49: Funding for after-school programs”
(see page 36)
2. **Policy brief:** “HIA of the Los Angeles City Living Wage Ordinance”
(see page 37)
3. **Inter-active tool:** Spreadsheet for estimating deaths prevented by a Living Wage Ordinance (On-line calculator available at: <http://www.ph.ucla.edu/hs/health-impact/index.php>)
(see Appendix 8)
4. **Logic framework:** Logic framework for the “HIA of California Proposition 49: Funding for after-school programs”
(see Appendix 9)

Or, it may be more of a process than a product

5. **Process for community involvement:** Eastern Neighborhoods Community Impact Assessment Process Flowchart (see Appendix 10).