What is Health Impact Assessment (HiA)?

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a “combination of procedures, methods, and tools by which a policy, program, or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population”1.

HIA is a “means of assessing the health impacts of policies, plans and projects in diverse economic sectors using quantitative, qualitative and participatory techniques”2. It aims to avoid the transfer of hidden health costs and to “promote multi sector responsibility for health and wellbeing”3 and relies on “understanding causal links so as to predict the consequences of proposed actions”4.

What are the Health Impact Assessment (HIA) guiding principles?

The HIA principles include5:

- Participation of decision makers and affected communities
- Equity
- Broad definition of health Treaty of Waitangi
- Commitment to sustainable development
- Ethical use of evidence

Why is HIA so important?

HIA is important as it can:

- place public health on the agenda of “many different agencies and individuals and increases awareness of what determines health status”3
- improve collaboration between different sectors and organisations (PHAC, 2007, p.6)
- influence decisions in policy fields other than health which seldom take health impacts into consideration6
- prevent health damage and enhance opportunities for health improvement3
- identify health inequalities that may arise from a proposal3
- increase community participation, and is an effective way of promoting community wellbeing across sectors5
- include local knowledge and experience which contributes to decision making processes7
- produce evidence based recommendations to adjust policies, programmes and projects to maximize health gain and reduce health inequality in exposure to health risk8

For Agencies and Policy / Decision Makers

HIA assists agencies to fulfil statutory obligations for protecting and promoting health and delivering sustainable development goals for example under the Resource Management Act 1991.

HIA considerations create better policy. Policies that consider health impacts are likely to achieve better outcomes for communities.9

For Communities

HIA brings together evidence in the form of the “published academic literature on potential health impacts, local data and statistics as well as the lived experiences and aspirations of the communities that are the focus of the HIA”10.

HIA encourages more community involvement resulting in more people being able to actively participate in decision making processes.

What are the different types of Health Impact Assessments?

Desktop and rapid HIAs can be completed in a few days or weeks while comprehensive and quantitative HIAs may require months. The decision to conduct a rapid or a comprehensive HIA is often determined by available time and resources11.

Often rapid appraisals are carried out as part of initial screening to ascertain if a more in depth or comprehensive assessment is needed12. Rapid HIAs are the most frequent in practice because they require less extensive resources13.

HIAs have also been classified into “prospective (before execution), concurrent (during execution)
and retrospective assessment (after the project has been implemented).^{12}

**What are the steps in a HIA?**

**Screening** – to determine if an HIA is the best way to ensure health and equity issues are addressed effectively in the proposal.

**Scoping** – to establish the extent of the HIA by identifying relevant determinants of health and developing a project plan.

**Appraisal** – collect and analyse a range of quantitative and qualitative evidence for potential impacts of health and equity. Public engagement and dialogue is part of this stage. (Quigley et al, 2006, p.3)

**Reporting with recommendations** – to collate the information into a set of recommendations based on the best available evidence for decision makers.

**Ongoing monitoring and evaluation** – to assess the development of the proposal and the influence and benefit of the HIA.^{5}

**How are the determinants of health linked?**

HIA reviews the pathways of how the determinants of health may be affected by a proposed policy, programme or project. The process focuses on outcomes as outlined in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Factors or determinants that affect our health and wellbeing**^{14}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Some Categories of determinants of health</th>
<th>Examples of specific health determinants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social and cultural factors</td>
<td>Social networks, family connections, racism, cultural and spiritual participation, perception of safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic factors</td>
<td>Income level, affordability of housing, access to employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental factors</td>
<td>Housing conditions and location, waste disposal, urban design, noise, transmission of infectious diseases e.g., exposure to pathogens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population-based services</td>
<td>Access to quality education, housing, public transport, health care, disability support, childcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual/behavioural factors (these are affected by all of the above)</td>
<td>Personal behaviours (e.g., smoking, physical activity, nutrition, alcohol and drug use), personal safety, employment status, educational attainment, stress levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological factors (unlikely to be affected by policy)</td>
<td>Biological age, genetics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Case Example: How are health and housing linked?**

Health impacts are the health **consequences** of particular actions. They can be beneficial (positive) or harmful (negative). For example, the health impacts or consequences from poor or inadequate housing (the social determinant of health) conditions include:

- **Dampness and cold.** Older housing tends to be damp, cold and uninsulated. Children and adults living in such conditions have a higher risk of developing respiratory conditions.
• **Overcrowding in housing.** This is associated with increased risk of infectious diseases, such as meningococcal disease, tuberculosis and rheumatic fever as well as with stress.

• **High housing costs.** This can negatively affect health by reducing the amount households can spend on healthy food and heating.

• **Poor indoor air quality.** Known aggravators include second-hand tobacco smoke, nitrogen dioxide from gas cookers and unflued heaters, toxic moulds, and dust mites. This can improve or aggravate respiratory conditions, allergic reactions and toxic reactions.

• **Ambient outdoor air quality.** This is affected by emissions from domestic home heating. Ambient outdoor air quality can lead to increases in hospital admissions and deaths.

• **Community and neighbourhood safety.** People’s sense of safety can have a large impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

• **Housing improvements.** These include better insulation and heating systems. Improvements can reduce the incidence of respiratory conditions and consequent hospitalisations.  

Below is the causal pathway that was used in the Health Impact Assessment on Environment Canterbury's Air Plan showing the effects of changes in woodburner legislation on homeowners.

What are some of the challenges for HIA work?

• The lack of capacity and people with the ability or willingness to undertake HIA is a barrier to its use in most places.

• The lack of availability of resources (time, expertise, data availability, finances) that all influence the quality of the HIA.

• The results of the HIA are heavily dependent on the robustness of the assumptions made at the beginning of the HIA.

What is the relationship between HIA and Health in All Policies?

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) can be a valuable tool for helping decision makers to embed positive health outcomes into specific policies and plans.

In summary, HIA is a practical aid that is:

- based on evidence
- focused on outcomes and
- encourages collaboration between a range of stakeholders

The "ultimate test of an HIA is whether or not it effectively informed and influenced decision making for the benefit of population wellbeing."  

References


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