

The rise of Health Impact Assessment

Checking the impact on public health of proposals is a vital part of modern decision-making, writes Catherine Heffernan.

Two cities, two scenarios. The first involves the development of an old medieval street into swish modern inner-city living. Two or three blocks of apartments were built with plans for a cinema, restaurants and shops to follow. Ten years later, the units remain derelict. The window is boarded up and the apartments house drug seekers and squatters with no access to health services, supermarkets and no community support. Mental and physical health are poor, drug use and alcoholism are rife.

In the second scenario, a council contemplates a proposal for a casino. Those arguing for it pointed to the employment the casino would bring to the area.

The proposal was rejected. For all the possible short-term financial benefits, the long-term impact on health was not desirable. The casino would have had a negative impact upon local businesses and caused further unemployment in the area. Moreover, it was likely that the casino would encourage gambling, particularly in those who could not afford it, thereby leading to more mental and physical health problems, which would have ended up straining the social and health services.

In a like scenario 1, those looking at the plans for a casino had the foresight to consider the long-term impact of the proposal on the local area. The health of current and future residents was considered.

Health impact assessment is a new approach to evaluating public health action. It is the estimation of the overall effects of a specified action on the health of a defined population. Such actions could include a proposed project such as a new motorway in an area or a policy, such as a local housing strategy, or a programme like Sure Start.

Health impact assessments have also been used to evaluate the impact of noise pollution from a music venue and air quality from traffic. Generally health impact assessments are used to measure the impact of programmes and policies arising from outside the local area on local people.

Health impact assessment ensures that decision makers at all levels consider all the potential impacts of a policy, programme or a project on the community and health inequalities. It identifies actions that will enhance positive effects and those which will reduce or eliminate negative effects. It then aims to improve the quality of public policy decisions by making recommendations that are likely to enhance the predicted positive health impacts and minimize the negative ones.



Crucially, it is a multi-disciplinary undertaking that involves communities and their views. It encourages public participation in the debate about public health issues, bringing them to the fore in decision and policy making. While methods may vary from assessment to assessment, there is a general consensus on its key elements: one of which is the emphasis on equity and equality. Often the most disadvantaged suffer the most negative health impacts, such as problems with transport with the relocation of a health or social service. Other core values are democracy, ethical use of evidence and sustainable development, that is, it is a development that meets the needs of the present population without damaging the health or the environment of future generations.

There are six stages to conducting a health impact assessment. The first stage consists of screening – compiling the evidence from different sources on the proposal. Basically, you select and analyse the policy, programme or project for assessment. You also profile the selection population – who is likely to be affected and their characteristics (demographics). This is followed by scoping, which consists of identifying the potential health impacts by getting information from a range of

people who have an interest in the policy, programme or project. This will also involve the establishment of a multidisciplinary steering group and the negotiation of favoured options. The third stage is the appraisal of the evidence compiled from the screening and the scoping stages. The importance, scale and likelihood of the potential impacts are evaluated in an analysis that is similar to Decision Analysis. This results in the fourth stage, a report on the recommendations for managing the impacts and the fifth stage, where the recommendations are implemented. The final stage is the ongoing monitoring and the evaluation of the impact of the proposed action.

It is almost nonsensical that people would not conduct health impact assessments prior to instating their proposals. After all, they influence decision makers to improve proposals that affect their populations. If done early enough in a project, situations like scenario 1 can be avoided and in this age of financial uncertainty, we cannot afford to be health crunching as well. For further information and examples of successful health impact assessments, check out: <http://www.who.int/hial/en/> 