



# Keeping up to date

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## Four Stories from the Field: The Increasing Momentum of Health Impact Assessment Methods and Approaches in New Zealand

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### Biographical Note

Matt has a long standing interest in health impact assessment methods and approaches. He is currently a Senior Advisor (HIA) for the Ministry of Health and he has previously worked at the WHO Regional Office for Europe in their HIA programme. He completed his MPH from The University of Auckland in HIA and is currently a doctoral candidate at the Health Inequalities Research Programme, University of Otago, Wellington, looking at ethnic and socioeconomic trends in breast, cervical and colorectal cancer survival in New Zealand, 1988-2004.

### BACKGROUND

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a practical approach that uses a combination of methods to predict the potential health effects of a policy or project on a population, particularly on vulnerable groups. Included with the assessment are evidence-based recommendations for decision makers about how positive health effects can be enhanced and negative health effects minimised.

Since the establishment of the Ministry of Health's Health Impact Assessment Support Unit in August 2007, there has been rapid growth and development of HIA methods and approaches across the country. The HIA Support Unit was established to embed HIA into public policy development processes so that potential impacts on health outcomes and inequalities can be identified and addressed from early in the process. There are five objectives of the Unit which focus on raising awareness about HIA within and outside the health sector; increasing the evidence base for HIA as an effective public health approach, and building capacity in the health and non-health sectors for HIA activities. A key activity of the Unit has been the establishment of an HIA Learning by Doing Fund which has allowed HIA practitioners at the local and regional level to develop the skills and expertise to use HIA as part of good public health practice. More information about the Unit and examples of HIAs and

Whānau Ora HIAs from around the country is available at [www.moh.govt.nz/hiasupportunit](http://www.moh.govt.nz/hiasupportunit).

This article presents four brief stories about different aspects of the development of HIA in New Zealand. It is not written as a systematic review of HIA development or an analysis of the success factors and barriers to its uptake. Rather it is written to describe some of the ways in which HIA methods and approaches are being trialled, applied and embedded into public policy development processes. The four stories look at capacity building for HIA including Whānau Ora HIA, HIA and health systems, HIA evaluation, and embedding HIA into public policy development.

### Guidelines for HIA in New Zealand

There are two main public policy-level guidelines for health impact assessment in New Zealand. The first document, "A Guide to Health Impact Assessment: A Policy Tool for New Zealand", was prepared by the Public Health Advisory Committee (PHAC, 2005) to introduce health impact assessment (HIA) as a practical way to ensure that health and wellbeing are considered when policy is being developed in all sectors. This guideline is now widely used in HIA activities around New Zealand.

The second tool, "Whānau Ora Health Impact Assessment" (Ministry of Health, 2007), was published in April 2007 by the

#### Keeping up to date - the 31st edition

Welcome!

*Each issue tells you about a current research, evidence and thought on an important issue for your work in health promotion. This edition is on the increasing momentum of the Health Impact Assessment (HIA) tool in New Zealand. We are thankful to Matt Soeberg, of the Ministry of Health, the author of the article.*

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Ministry of Health and builds on the Public Health Advisory Committee's, 'A Guide to HIA: A Policy Tool for New Zealand'. It follows the same methodology: Screening, Scoping, Appraisal and Reporting and Evaluation. It was developed for use by policy makers as a tool for assessing the positive and negative impact of their policies on Māori and to identify ways in which these could be enhanced or adapted. It complements other resources aimed at promoting Māori health including the Health Equity Assessment Tool (Signal et al., 2008). It was produced in response to the fact that the Māori population experiences significantly poorer health outcomes than the rest of New Zealand's population and as a way to support delivery of the Ministry of Health's strategic vision to improve health outcomes and reduce inequalities for Māori outlined in He Korowai Oranga: Māori Health Strategy (Ministry of Health, 2002). At the heart of the tool is the concept of 'Whānau ora', which means, 'Māori families being supported to achieve their maximum health and well being'. Its overarching aim is to ensure equity in health for Māori.

## CAPACITY BUILDING FOR HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT

The HIA Support Unit has adopted a capacity building approach that focuses on building the skills, organisational capacity and institutional arrangements to improve health outcomes and address health inequalities many times over.

Training is an important part of capacity building for HIA. HIA training is provided in a number of different ways throughout New Zealand. HIA is taught as a topic within a number of postgraduate public health courses, including environmental health and health promotion topics, in universities around the country. The University of Otago, Wellington, continues to offer its annual HIA courses as part of the summer school programme. In 2008, the Ministry of Health's Māori Health Directorate and HIA Support Unit funded Whānau Ora HIA training around the country (see Box 2). HIA training is also offered through other work programmes such as training for health protection officers, public health medicine registrars, and HIA training specifically delivered for individual agencies. In addition, the HIA Support Unit has hosted two HIA practitioner

workshops focusing on different aspects of HIA methodology. The most recent HIA practitioners' workshop was held in Auckland in March 2009 and examined different approaches to the evaluation of HIA. During 2009/10, the HIA Support Unit will produce a number of evidence bulletins about good practice for HIA.

In 2007, the HIA Support Unit undertook a baseline survey of HIA development in New Zealand. The survey identified that while training was important, it was not enough on its own to increase the number of HIA activities across the country. As a result, the Unit established the HIA Learning by Doing Fund. It was set up to support the delivery of the Unit's priorities of creating capacity and developing the evidence base on HIA. There have been two rounds of the Fund and the successful applications have come from around the country and including a range of HIA activities including completed HIAs, evaluations of HIAs, and HIA development projects. More information about the fund is available on the HIA Support Unit's website.

### Box 3. Whānau Ora HIA Training

Whānau Ora HIA was launched in April 2008 as part of the Ministry's response to He Korowai Oranga and provides a framework to support the New Zealand Health Strategy.

The Ministry of Health contracted the HIA Research Unit at the University of Otago to deliver half-day and two-day Whānau Ora HIA training workshops. A total of 268 people attended the ten half-day workshops and 66 people attended the four two-day workshops. The workshops were attended by a range of organisations from the health and non-health sectors. Comments from participants included:

- Whānau Ora HIA looks at the positives and negatives, opportunities and challenges of a project and can be used to analyse proposals, as part of the planning process, and can be applied across sectors
- HIA is for everyone. The more people know and learn how and why to use the tool, the more positive impacts that should result.

More information about Whānau Ora HIA can be found at the HIA Support Unit's website.

## HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND HEALTH SYSTEMS

Social, economic, and other wider environmental factors are particularly significant in determining population health and wellbeing. While the health sector plays a critical role in influencing the downstream determinants of health in a direct way, such as through health services and individual risk factors and behaviours, it also has an important role in indirectly influencing the upstream determinants of health.

*The role of the health sector is to advocate and lead intersectoral actions for health and to ensure that policies adopted in other sectors do not damage the health of the population and equity in health care (Stahl et al., 2007).*

While the approaches and evidence for influencing the downstream determinants of health are well established and have become part of day-to-day practice across the health sector, the models for influencing the upstream determinants of health are less clear. Actions to address the upstream determinants of health are not novel, and are an integral part of improving social wellbeing and standards of living. However they also provide new opportunities for explicitly improving health outcomes. As well as looking to successful multi-faceted actions adopted for downstream determinants there are a number of promising approaches to address upstream determinants, internationally and locally (Public Health Advisory Committee, 2006).

Health impact assessment is one approach available to different organisations in the health system for improving health and addressing health inequalities. The use of HIA has increased significantly with a total of 17 HIAs completed or in progress between August 2007 and October 2008. This is compared with the 14 HIAs completed in the three year period between March 2004 and July 2007. The majority of these HIAs have been completed at a local and regional level with four completed at a central government level. Urban planning and growth is a policy topic that the majority of HIAs have been focused on. There is an opportunity to strengthen the use of HIA at central government

level. At the local level, District Health Boards (DHBs), primary health organisations (PHOs), public health units and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are the bridge between government policy development and implementation. These organisations work vertically (across different parts of the health sector) and horizontally (across non-health sectors) reinforcing the approach that there are multiple causes of health and illness and that there are multiple approaches and responses (see Box 1).

Box 1. Examples of the Different Determinants of Health Addressed in Completed or In Progress HIAs in New Zealand

- Urban development and urban planning
- Regional land transport strategy development and implementation
- Oral health care services
- Graffiti management
- Proposed extension of a liquor ban
- Water irrigation
- Waste management
- Air quality management

## EVALUATING HIA

As a relatively new approach, it is particularly important that HIAs are evaluated. Evaluation of HIAs includes documentation of the process to demonstrate good practice, and demonstration that the predictions relating to health effects were accurate and the recommendations made were useful. Engagement of communities is often regarded as a key part of health impact assessments and so evaluation of this aspect may also be important.

Evaluation of health impact assessment is generally regarded as an underdeveloped field, and in fact is regarded by some as its greatest weakness. There have been very few evaluations of HIAs completed and published, and there is limited guidance on how to evaluate an HIA. There is also disagreement about what an HIA aims to achieve and therefore how it should be evaluated.

Most evaluation of HIA uses the terms process, impact and outcome evaluation.

The World Health Organization's "HIA evidence" website (WHO, 2009) defines these terms as follows:

- Process evaluation: measuring the activities that occur while a programme is running, identifying who is involved and whether the separate components of a programme are working.
- Impact evaluation: measuring the immediate effect of a programme (particularly its objectives).
- Outcome evaluation: measuring the long-term effects of a programme (particularly its goals).

The Ministry's HIA Support Unit has focused in the last year on examining the evaluation of HIA. The Unit has commissioned some work on the evaluation of HIA which will be published later this year. Through the Learning by Doing Fund, the Unit is also encouraging HIA practitioners to complete a case study report following the completion of their HIA activity to provide some reflective learning from the HIA process. Most recently, the HIA Support Unit has funded an impact evaluation on one of New Zealand's most substantial and high profile HIAs to date – the Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy HIA (see Box 3).

Box 3. Process and Impact Evaluation of the Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy HIA

In 2005, a collaboration between public health and local government authorities performed an HIA on the Christchurch Urban Development Strategy Options paper in New Zealand. The findings of this were incorporated into the Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy. A process and impact evaluation of the Christchurch HIA was undertaken using qualitative methodologies. The evaluation found that the HIA had demonstrable impacts on planning and implementation of the final Urban Development Strategy as well as indirect impacts on understandings and ways of working in this successful collaboration within and between organisations.

Reference: Mathias and Harris-Roxas, 2009

## EMBEDDING HIA INTO PUBLIC POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The current and future focus of the Health Impact Assessment Support Unit is continuing to promote good practice HIA as well as promote the integration of HIA into public policy development processes. This is an ambitious target for the HIA Support Unit but work has already begun on development relationships and capacity within specific sectors. New Zealand's legislative framework points to some natural partners for HIA. The transport sector is a good example of where these natural synergies lie.

As a result of a growing recognition of the impact of transport on the wellbeing of current and future generations, transport sector objectives and priorities are changing. Both in New Zealand and internationally, sustainability and public health are increasingly on the transport agenda. For instance, the first New Zealand Transport Strategy (Ministry of Transport, 2002) introduced the five objectives that remain current today:

- ensuring environmental sustainability
- assisting economic development
- assisting safety and personal security
- improving access and mobility
- protecting and promoting public health.

These objectives were supported by legislation – the Land Transport Management Act (LTMA) – and have been carried through and strengthened in the 2008 amendments to the Act, and the New Zealand Transport Strategy 2008 (Ministry of Transport, 2008).

However, the policy and legislative requirement to consider public health has not been accompanied or supported by clarification or guidance on what 'protecting and promoting public health' means. Tools for measuring the potential contribution of transport plans and proposals towards the five objectives of the NZTS remain under-developed. Investment in active transport is increasing, but remains tiny in comparison with spending on roads. Inequalities in the distribution of positive and negative transport impacts are not well addressed, and although there is now increasing policy attention given to the 'transport disadvantaged', there is still a lack of emphasis at the delivery level to ensure that disadvantaged communities and



individuals are not further disadvantaged by transport decisions. There is also significant room for improving the participation of Māori in transport decision making.

The New Zealand Transport Agency and the Ministry of Health have recently co-funded a research report on integrating HIA to land transport planning (see Box 4).

#### Box 4. Applying Health Impact Assessment to Land Transport Planning

In June 2009, the New Zealand Transport Agency published a research report on the application of HIA to land transport planning (New Zealand Transport Agency, 2009). The research was conducted by public health consultants Quigley and Watts Ltd and impact assessment specialist Martin Ward. The research project had four objectives including to produce better integration of HIA with other development processes in a transport context. The research methods included an international literature review, a description of various transport planning processes in New Zealand, and four case studies examining how HIA has been applied in land transport planning in New Zealand to date.

The report include some key learnings about the application of HIA to transport planning:

- early application of HIA, at a point where a number of options are being considered, is advisable;
- a multi-disciplinary approach to HIA that involves partnership between public health specialists, transport professionals, and the affected community is best practice;
- when engaging community input, it is vital that proactive efforts are made to identify and engage disadvantaged communities and Māori early in the HIA process, and public health sector networks are likely to assist with such engagement.
- shared learning and relationship building between sectors has been demonstrated to be a key benefit of HIA

The research report is available at: <http://www.landtransport.govt.nz/research/reports/375.pdf>

## CONCLUSION

The four stories briefly outlined in this article represent the diverse expansion of HIA methods and approaches across New Zealand. The focus for the first two years of the Health Impact Assessment Support Unit has been on increasing the evidence base and building capacity for HIA. The work of the Unit is now focusing on embedding HIA into public policy development processes.

Different organisations in the health system, including non-governmental organisations, Māori providers, District Health Boards, public health services, can have an important role in influencing the upstream determinants of health. HIA methods and approaches are an effective way to work within and outside the health system to improve health. Some specific ways in which the health promotion can continue with the rapid development and expansion of HIA in New Zealand include:

- continue to build sustainable capacity within their organisations (and other organisations) for health impact assessment methods and approaches
- promote the use of HIA methods and approaches as an effective approach to address the upstream determinants of health within the health system
- support and undertake process, impact and outcome evaluations of HIA methods and approaches
- look at ways of embedding and integrating HIA into healthy public policy development processes.

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