



EUPHA Section on Public Health Epidemiology Helsinki Conference 2007 Workshop Summary

At the 15th EUPHA conference in Helsinki the Public Health Epidemiology Section organised a workshop entitled "The role of Public Health Epidemiology in the Health Technology Assessment". This was chaired by Paolo Villari, Alastair Leyland and Giuseppe La Torre.

The key idea that inspired the workshop was that health systems in developed nations have to contend with the growing spread of chronic diseases whilst the provision of a high quality, efficacious and efficient service remains the principal aim. The specific aim of the workshop was to give an overview of the framework of Health Technology Assessment (HTA) and how HTA has changed over time (Renaldo Battista) as well as the possible relationship between HTA and Epidemiology (Walter Holland).

Primary objectives of Public Health are the improvement of community health, the reduction of population health risk factors, and the improvement of health care provision. But an emerging problem in Public Health is the limited nature of resources which contrasts with the diffusion of new technologies and the growth of health needs due to population aging and uptake of less healthy life-styles.

Public Health interventions are designed to control, prevent and reduce health problems, such as obesity, sexually transmitted diseases, and road and domestic injuries, and also to decrease the burden of chronic-degenerative and infectious diseases. This means that Epidemiology has a fundamental role in giving the process the appropriate methodological approach. As such the link and the relationship between Public Health Epidemiology and HTA would appear to be a good tool to provide answers not only regarding the burden of disease in a certain population, and the efficacy and effectiveness of health technology, but also concerning the social and organisational impact of a technology, seen in a broader sense, and so is a prerequisite for economic evaluations and systematic reviews. The relationship between Public Health Epidemiology and HTA could, for example, encompass issues such as vaccinations, disease screenings, health promotion and educational campaign. Battista, in his presentation "Health Technology Assessment and Public Health: a time for convergence", pointed out that HTA is a field of application of several disciplines at the core of Public Health Science. Whereas the development paths of HTA and Public Health are distinct, a shared interest in knowledge translation underscores the need to bolster convergence between them. Different scenarios of convergence are examined at the conceptual, disciplinary and methodological, and organizational levels. The future of health systems and population health will both benefit from greater harmonization between Public Health and HTA.

"Public Health Epidemiology in Health Technology Assessment: risks and opportunities" was the theme tackled by Holland. Formal evaluation of procedures and equipment has become the norm in most health services, particularly for pharmaceutical agents. However, it should also be applied to the assessment of methodologies used on populations for health promotion and disease prevention. There are examples of HTA for the evaluation of screening, e.g. for breast cancer, in France and in the UK. In Sweden formal HTAs have been applied to polio vaccination and water fluoridation. However, in most countries HTA has largely been concerned with individual clinical care rather than population (public health) subjects.

The discussion dealt with historical examples of HTA for health improvement, for example the assessment of measures to reduce maternal mortality, the introduction of the Clean Air Act in the UK in 1956, and the banning of smoking in public places. Part of the reason for the neglect of HTA for measures to improve health rather than just for the treatment of disease is the complexity of the necessary measures, the politically changed nature of possible interventions, the lack of charisma of public health and the belief that most measures make "common sense". Suggestions as to how epidemiology can provide the necessary framework for HTA for health improvement and disease prevention were given as well as possible topics (and approaches) that would broaden the application of HTA from its narrow disease treatment perspective.