

May 2004 - Paper of the month

Paper: Health impact assessment as an agent of policy change: improving the health impacts of the mayor of London's draft transport strategy.

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Policy makers have crucial impact on developing programs to improve individuals' health. Unfortunately, sometimes the health consequences of 'bad' policies are realized long after policies had been already implemented. Intuitively it seems just right to anticipate potential harms before implementation.

The relevance of this paper:

This article was chosen because it presents this 'common sense' approach in public health practice, which is not commonly used.

The following merits of the article were identified as important:

- i) it informs the reader about a new strategy developed in UK, called 'the Health Impact Assessment (HIA)'. In brief, it is a combination of procedures, methods and tools by which a policy, program or project may be judged to its potential effect on population health, including considering equity issues. For those interested in policy change a reference to the HIA strategy is given.
- ii) The article presents the application of the HIA in relation to new transport policy developed for London.
Given that transport has currently been identified as appropriate setting for physical activity promotion in Australia, it is very relevant and useful example for those who are interested in the promotion of health through physical activity.
- iii) The article presents a process evaluation of a multidisciplinary collaborative interaction between transport, health and members of the community. The results indicate that within one month, major changes to the transport policy were introduced, before the final draft submitted, attributable to HIA. A table summarizes the HIA suggested changes, how transport interpreted the each suggestion and what was included in final draft, all illustrating the application of the strategy in practice. This is important because it provides the 'flesh and blood' necessary to back-up scientists' advocacy for collaborative approaches and for health promotion.
- iv) Most important is the fact that the authors underscore the importance of taking the evaluation to the next stage by which this strategy will be assessed; a set of 'outcomes' in measurable terms were specified for monitoring the impact of the new policy once implemented. These end points ensure accountability for all those who involved in the HIA initiatives in theory and in practice.
- v) Finally, in order that the reader will not be carried away by 'science' and 'good process' as a guarantee of success, it is important to read the 'acknowledgment', where the human factor comes as an important feature of this successful collaboration; without the openness to new ideas, such as important factor when people from different discipline meet.

This paper can be used as a 'template' for practitioners who engage in multi-level approach to health promotion.