

## Health Impact Assessment as tool for public health grown

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In recent years some of the most accredited health agencies have expressed a growing interest in Health Impact Assessment.

This interest has arisen from the scientific evidence that demonstrates possible future health gains, especially in highly developed countries, can result not only from direct health interventions (both preventive and curative) but, above all, by the development of social, economic and environmental policies that take into consideration the policies impact on citizens' health; many determinants do not originate from the health sector.

Health is often central or the first ranked topic of each pending political decision.

Strong and rigorous epidemiological approaches employed in health during the past decade or so have allowed us to identify causal relationships for diseases as well as health promoting factors. In the same way, epidemiological observation has provided us with a number of well-founded interpretative elements concerning the current situation, for example, health inequities among different social groups and among populations belonging to different, even if relatively close, geographical areas.

The best health technologies alone are not able to provide solutions for our current health needs.

It is not by chance that the Expert Gothenburg Conference (1999), promoted by the World Health Organization, underlined the need to effectively use tools suitable for evaluating policies, programmes or plans in order to assess their potential effects on the health of the population and the distribution of those effects within the population (Gothenburg Consensus Paper, WHO, 1999).

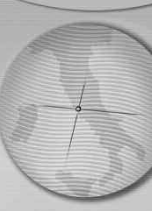
Therefore, public Health specialists are called to at least partially shift the focus of their attention to not only include the direct causes of disease and health but also to include the evaluation of the policies that, indirectly, influences these direct causes: from pollution to urban transport policies, from life styles to incomes/wages/pricing policies, from social relationships to urban planning and housing policies. This shift cannot be speedy or immediate.

Nevertheless, some unique elements particular to this new century call for public health researchers and professionals to shift the focus their attention towards Health Impact Assessment, issues such as globalization, European integration and emerging Regional integration needs; all of which highlight the fact that we are not able to postpone engaging with this topic.

World markets, national economics and society, individual health risks, household economy and health care systems interact within a framework of strict and complex connections to define the population's levels of health.

These connections are extremely well known to citizens, who have in the past few years, often independently create movements in opinion in order to express doubts and constraints about pending decisions that could influence health levels already attained.

Health Impact Assessment is a difficult challenge for public health specialists: it means being able to involve stake-holders and decision-makers, being able to talk with a lot of varying disciplines far from our own and to be able to evaluate health in a holistic way.



It is probably for these reasons that Health Impact Assessment methodologies are largely used in those countries whose cultural and institutional conditions are particularly well prepared and in which the eventual regulations regarding HIA will be merely taking note of an already deep-seated health management system.

On the other hand the spin off of health Impact Assessment seem too important for not to accept the challenge: it provides a mechanism for health to inform decision making, improves inter-sectoral working, encourages public participation in decision making, influences decision.

The Finland's Presidency of the European Union, II semester 2006, highlighted Health Impact Assessment, making clear their willingness to use it for evaluating European Union policies and organizing a large number of discussions and study opportunities, while the current Portuguese Presidency is strongly supporting the development of the network of experts from EU Member States.

This could contribute to the understanding that many factors outside of the health sector do indeed have an effect on the health of a population and on health systems and will encourage inter-sectoral cooperation.

Moreover, the European Commission has made it a priority to carry out impact assessments on health and health systems as a part a more comprehensive plan addressed to capture social, economic and environmental impacts on all major new proposals.

For these reasons all of the European Union Member States are strongly supported in developing methodologies and tools for addressing health and health systems in decision making.

In this edition of the Italian Journal Public Health we present some of the most relevant European experiences: given the well known social, political and economic diversity between the EU it is quite clear that Health Impact Assessment needs to be flexible enough to adapt to each specific context. But some common factors influencing HIA effectiveness can be underlined: decision-makers commitment, capacity building and community involvement.

Our hope is that the experiences presented will contribute to the debate surrounding the role of public health specialists within a new framework, and further utilise our skills in influencing others outside our usual circles.