



Ethical considerations – A key element of health technology assessment

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Introduction

- What is health technology assessment (HTA)?
- “A form of policy research that systematically examines short- and long-term consequences of the application of a health technology” (OTA, 1976)
- “A structured analysis of a health technology, a set of related technologies, or a technology-related issue that is performed for the purpose of providing input to a policy decision” (Banta, 1997)

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Ethical considerations

- Is ethical inquiry part of HTA?
- Is ethical inquiry a central and important part of HTA?

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Ethics is part of HTA...

- “Technology assessment is comprehensive in scope, examining impacts on social, **ethical**, legal, and other systems . . .” (OTA, 1976)
- “HTA . . . includes studies of **ethical** and social consequences of technology; factors speeding or impeding development and diffusion of health technology; the effects of public policies on diffusion and use of health technology and suggested changes in those policies; and studies of variation in use of technologies...” (Banta, 1997)

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But is it an important part?

- No clear-cut proof that ethical inquiry is “often ignored”
- HTA agencies in general tend to use a very general approach to ethical issues
- Sections on ethical inquiry in HTA reports are often very brief
- No clear methods are outlined

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Ethical approaches I

- Beauchamp & Childress: four principles approach (1993)
 - **Beneficence**: helping others
 - **Non-maleficence**: doing no harm
 - **Respect for autonomy**: self-determination
 - **Justice**: fair allocation of goods and services

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Example: Down Syndrome screening

- Many ethical considerations
- **Beneficence and non-maleficence:** detection rates in relation to risk of foetal loss
- **Autonomy:** values and self-government of parents
- **Justice:** “how” and “to whom” is the program offered, and “how” and “who” is financing the program?

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Limitations of Beauchamp/Childress

- Principles are considered ‘prima facie’ – binding unless they conflict with obligations of another moral principle
- Principles often do not give clear guidance
- E.g. individual rights versus society needs

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Ethical approaches II

- Approach focusing on context
- E.g. effectiveness is not contentious: improving health outcome, longer life expectancy, less morbidity, improved quality of life etc.
- Put within context of available resources
- “It is very well possible that persons involved do agree about decisions made with respect to a technology, while retaining their different perspectives and disagreement about basic issues” (Reuzel, 2001)

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Example: Cochlear implants (CI)

- Allow profoundly deaf people to receive sound
- Controversy depending on whether deafness is viewed as a pathological disorder, or as a feature of a specific cultural minority
- Can employing cochlear implantation be justified? (*related to technology*)
- How to assess cochlear implantation whilst acknowledging the different perspectives on deafness? (*related to fairness of procedure*)

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Ethical inquiry in CI

- 'Standard' HTA is not an optimal approach:
 - Emotional controversy
 - Power differences
 - Social context is complicated
- Vicarious learning is needed - interactive technology assessment (*iTA*):
 - To identify criteria of success and acceptability of paediatric cochlear implantation, as formulated by persons involved
 - To gain insight into the extent to which current practice corresponds to these criteria
 - To formulate research questions

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Advantages *iTA*

- All stakeholders have an equal voice
- Improves comprehensiveness, acceptance, and relevance of the evaluation
- Allows for explicitly addressing ethical aspects of a technology and dealing with moral controversy

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Methodological development

- Difficult to find a rigorous acceptable model of ethical considerations in HTA studies
- There is a need for methodology development:
 - A) Standard HTA – methodological problem
 - Ethical inquiry is addition (e.g. principles approach)
 - B) Social context – conceptual problem
 - Mainly qualitative approaches (e.g. *iTA* approach)

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Involvement of ethicists

- Ethical knowledge is needed in both approaches
 - A) Identifying ethical considerations
 - Moral aspects are features of technology
 - B) Make ethical considerations explicit in debate
 - Question of legitimacy
- A & B are not mutually exclusive

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Conclusion/Discussion

- Guidelines are needed!
- Should HTA reports include a separate section on ethics where appropriate?
- Would a degree of standardisation of ethical inquiry in HTA be appropriate?