

Health needs assessment: a practical approach

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Introduction

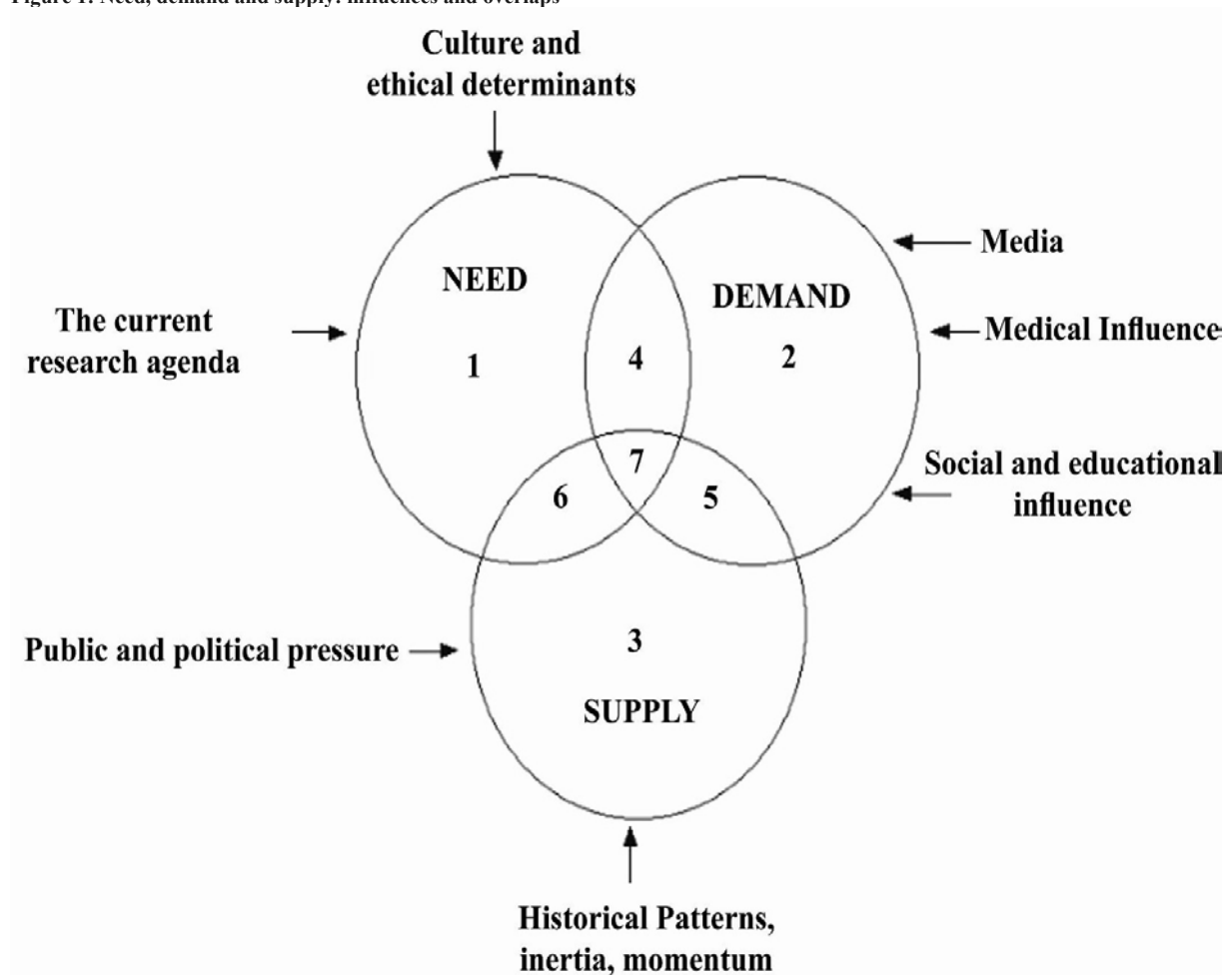
Health needs assessment (HNA) is a systematic method of identifying unmet health and healthcare needs of a population, and making changes to meet these unmet needs ⁽¹⁾.

The main objectives for HNA are to change services for the better, to improve equity and to set priorities. It is important to distinguish ‘health Needs’ (capacity to benefit) from wants/demands and ‘supply/resource’ issues. In the diagram below,

an HNA exercise should aim to move/change the ‘demand and supply’ circles to be congruent with the Needs circle thus maximizing area 7 (figure 1).

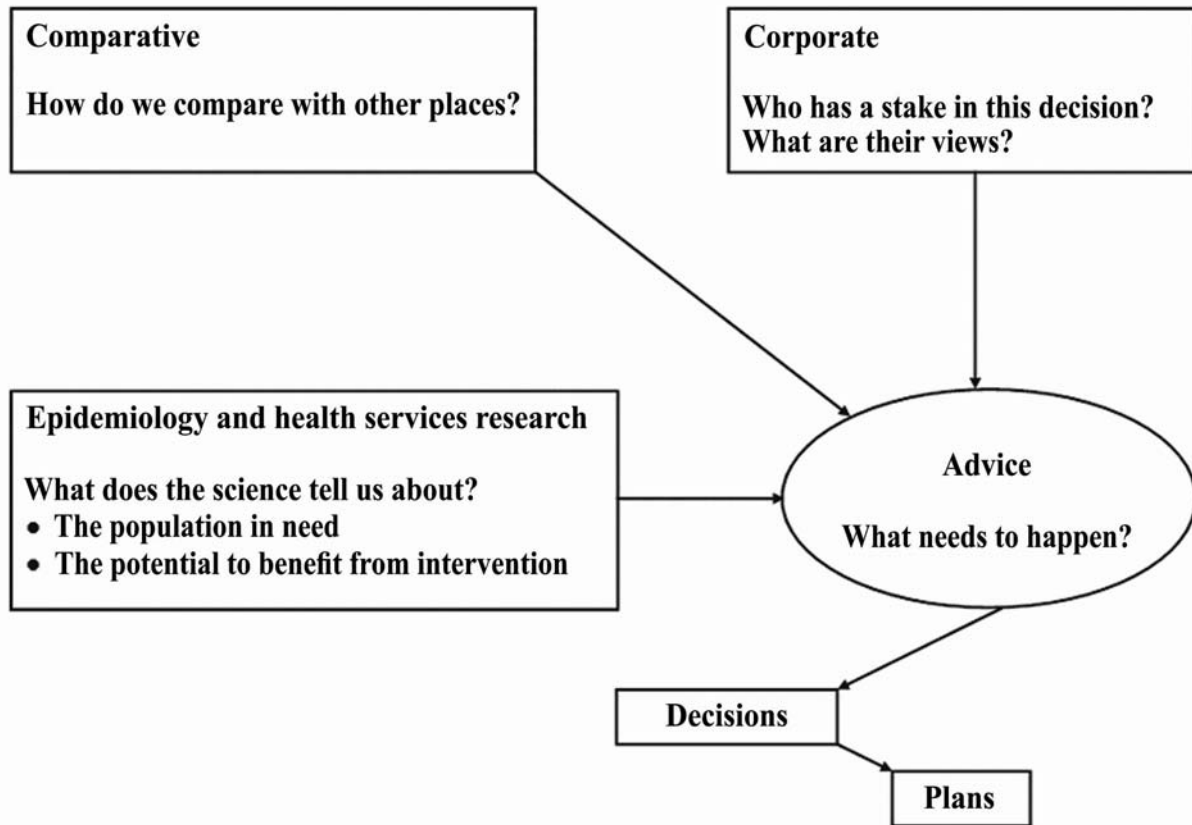
There are broad HNA perspectives that complement each other: corporate (expert/professional normative needs), patient/public (felt/expressed needs), comparative and the epidemiological (research evidence, cost-effectiveness, health status and epidemiological) approaches (figure 2).

Figure 1: Need, demand and supply: influences and overlaps



Source: Andrew Stevens, James Raftery, Jonathan Mant: An Introduction to health care needs assessment [online] available from <http://hena.radcliffe-oxford.com/> [accessed on April 2007]

Figure 2: Health Needs Assessment perspectives



Source: Elkheir R, Lambert M: How to do Health Needs Assessment; BMJ Health Intelligence, [online] available from <http://healthintelligence.bmj.com/hi/do/commissioning/topics/basics/COM.BAS.005.html> [accessed April 2007].

Planning and implementing health needs assessment

It's all in the planning! There are lots of guides on how to do HNA in a lot of detail. This is a brief summary. It is most important to recognize that it is about informing change to meet need; collecting and collating information is only part of it.

Key to planning HNA, one must define & agree parameters of the assessment (especially: Whose needs; What needs; Where the people are; When you want to study and intervene). To do this you need to establish: why it needs to be done, who is concerned about the outcome, and what time & resources are available- (people and money). If these could not be established then one should only proceed with extreme caution ⁽²⁾.

The process of needs assessment should ordinarily involve the following components:

1. a review of the existing sources of information relevant to your target population
2. a profile of existing services and description of population profile
3. views of your target population
4. the views of relevant practitioners and service providers
5. analysis and interpretation of the results in order to draw conclusions
6. taking action through prioritising the identified needs, appraising the options for meeting those needs, and implementing an action plan including allocation of resources.
7. monitoring and evaluation to check that the changes you have implemented are having the desired effect of meeting the needs of your target population.

To implement the HNA process, the following steps would need to be followed:

- Identify key stakeholders/individuals to be involved in a 'Steering Group'.
- Define the target population for the needs assessment as specifically as possible. Make sure the needs of the target population are the focus of the needs assessment.
- Communicate the aims of the needs assessment to stakeholders/service providers.
- Decide who will carry out the needs assessment (e.g. service Officers, partner agencies or an external contractor). Consider whether additional assistance may be needed (e.g., with data collection, entry and analysis, or report writing), and get a commitment from the relevant staff as soon as possible.
- Estimate the cost and identify the source of funding for the needs assessment.
- Identify the appropriate overall approach to your needs assessment.
- Gather existing sources of information relevant to the HNA (especially epidemiological and services related). Consider what this information tells you about the needs.
- Identify the current services. Consider their capacity, accessibility and fitness for purpose/needs.
- Consider methods to obtain the views of your target population (and practicalities, e.g. timescales, costs, ethical approval, etc)
- Consider methods to obtain the views of service providers. Think of ways to engage busy staff and to allay people's fears (e.g. of closure) or concerns (e.g. no action will follow)
- Ensure that information is analyzed and interpreted appropriately, and that conclusions are drawn. Consider results can be relayed back to all those who contributed to the process.
- Once you have identified the needs of your target population, prioritize and consider all the

options for meeting them using evidence based clinical and cost effective approaches

- Consider how the views of service users could be taken into account in the prioritization and option appraisal process and how to ensure service providers are involved in the development of the implementation plan.
- Develop an appropriate SMART implementation/action plan and once agreed, consider how to monitor and evaluate using most appropriate methodology and whether it can be done internally or by an external consultant.

Practical approach for planning the HNA: what to think about ⁽²⁾

Think about

When planning a needs assessment think about:

- Making sure the needs of service users are the focus of the needs assessment
- Identifying the right people to be involved in the process and set up a steering group
- What you want to measure and for whom you want to measure it
- How to make your question as specific and focused as possible
- Identifying the appropriate approach to your needs assessment

1\ Key questions to ask of existing sources of information

- How big is the target population?
- What do they look like? For example, what is their age profile? How many of them are male and how many are female?
- What do we know about the specific problem in the client group (who, when, for how long, how much, why, etc?)
- Are they generally in employment or unemployed?
- Where do they live? Who do they live with, e.g. dependent children?

- Are they already in contact with services, or are they "hidden" from existing services?
- With which services are they in contact?
- How often do they use services? Which groups use which services?
- What interventions are most effective for this population?

Think about

When gathering information about your target population from existing data sources, think about:

- What this information tells you about the needs of your target population
- What the strengths and weaknesses of the information are
- Whether you need to consult with a Data Protection Officer before using or sharing personal assessment data for the needs assessment
- What the most effective interventions for your target population are

2\ Key questions to ask when undertaking a service profile

- Where is the service located?
- What information is available about services commissioned from other areas?
- What are the service's opening hours? Is there any out-of-hours provision such as a helpline or answering service?
- What range of clients does the service cater for - in terms of age, gender, drug of choice, geographical distribution, etc.?
- What *specific* needs does the service meet for its clients?
- How does the service receive referrals, and from whom do its referrals come?
- How many clients does the service see each week, month, quarter, year?

- On average, how long do clients stay with the service and what are their reasons for leaving (e.g., drop-out, onward referral)?
- How many clients each week / month are referred on to other agencies?
- What is the caseload of staff? How many full-time staff does the service employ, and how much time do they have available each week for client appointments?
- Is there any information from staff satisfaction or user satisfaction surveys?
- How do existing clients access the service - on foot, by car, by public transportation? How accessible is the service by public transportation?
- Does the service have a waiting list? If so, how long do drug users have to wait before accessing the service?
- What support, if any, is provided while waiting? What follow-up support is provided?
- If the service operates an appointment system, what proportion of clients do not attend (DNA)? How many appointments per week/month are DNA?

Think about

When undertaking a profile of existing services think about

- The range of needs currently being met by those services, the capacity of those services, and their accessibility to your target population
- Whether you have included all the services relevant to your target population (e.g. housing, employability, family support)
- How to identify the gap between current provision and needs of your target population

Think about

When gathering the views of service users think about:

- How to make sure service users are clear about why you are seeking their views

- The most appropriate methods of gathering the views of your target population (Survey/Questionnaires; interviews; focus groups; Local service users; research/RCT; etc)
- Ethical issues involved in your needs assessment and how to capture hidden population

Think about

When gathering the views of service providers think about:

- Ways of actively engaging busy staff in your needs assessment
- The range of agencies and the range of staff who could contribute to the needs assessment process
- The most appropriate methods for gathering the views of your target group
- Ways to allay people's fears (e.g. of closure) or concerns (e.g. that no action will be taken)

3\ Key questions for analyzing, interpreting and drawing conclusions

- What proportion of your target population have indicated that they have a particular need?
- What are the areas of agreement between service providers and your target population about the target population's needs? What are the areas of disagreement?
- Have you identified any areas of need among your target population that practitioners were largely unaware of?
- Which of the needs of your target population are currently being met, and which are not being met?
- Which services are easy for your target population to access and why? What are the barriers for your target population in having their needs met?
- What are the risks to your target population (or other people) in not having their needs met?

- How confident do you feel that the information you have gathered is broadly representative of the views of your target population and local practitioners?

Researchers could also use the analysis process to consider what this information tells them about the way services have been planned and developed, and the ways resources have been used. Specific questions include:

- To what extent do existing services have the capacity and ability to meet the identified needs?
- Is funding being directed where it is most needed?
- What are the implications for the planning and funding / resource allocation processes?
- To what extent do existing priorities fit in with the needs identified in the exercise?

Think about

When analyzing, interpreting and drawing conclusions think about

- How information gathered as part of a needs assessment should be analysed and interpreted
- How this information informs your understanding of the needs of the target population
- How those who gathered the information may contribute to the analysis process
- How the results of the needs assessment should be relayed back to all those who contributed to the process

4\ Key questions for prioritization and option appraisal

When prioritizing at the local level, may need to consider the following questions:

- Which of the needs emerging from the needs assessment fit in most closely with the current priorities?
- Which needs can be met within the (relatively narrow) remit of the specified service?

- Is it within the capacity of the specified service to address these needs?

Considering the options for change - the relationship between impact and cost

Likely impact of change		
Cost/resources needed to make change	Low	High
Low	Soft target - Wait	Quick win - GO!
High	Hold off	Challenging - Wait

5\ Impact, Changeability, Acceptability and Resource Feasibility.

Key Questions to Ask When Appraising the Options and Prioritizing

Impact

- What changes would have the greatest positive impact in meeting the needs of your target population?
- Do the identified needs relate to a local or a national priority?
- What would be the implications of not addressing the needs of your target population?

Changeability

- Which things can be changed and effectively improved by partner agencies?
- What evidence is there of effective interventions for the target population?
- Can negative impacts be stopped or reduced?
- Are there national or local, professional or organizational policies that set out guidelines on what should be done (e.g. national service frameworks, Social Services Inspectorate, national guidance on prescribing, etc.)?

Acceptability

- Which of the options for change are likely to be most acceptable to the target population, to the wider community, to service providers and practitioners, and to commissioners and managers?
- What might be the 'knock-on effects' or unintended consequences of making a change?

Resource feasibility

- What resources are required to implement the proposed changes?

- Can existing resources be used differently?
- What resources will be released if ineffective actions are stopped?
- Are there other resources available that have not been considered before?
- Which of the actions will achieve the greatest impact for the resources used?

6\ Key Questions: Planning Action

Think about

When planning for action think about:

- How to prioritize the different options, based on their impact, changeability, acceptability and resource feasibility.
- How to involve service commissioners and other people in strategic positions.
- How to ensure service providers are involved in the development of the implementation plan.

7\ Key Questions: Monitoring and Evaluation: Key Questions to Ask when Undertaking an Evaluation

Process evaluation

- Are the original aims and objectives being followed, or still relevant?
- What is happening? Is everything proceeding as expected? If not, why not?
- What do service providers and service users think about the changes? Are things working for them? Why or why not?
- What resources are being used? Are they adequate?

Outcome evaluation

- Have the aims and objectives of the changes been achieved?

- How many people have benefited from the changes, and what are their characteristics?
- Are the people who are benefiting from the changes the same people you intended to benefit from it?

Think about

When planning to monitor and evaluate think about:

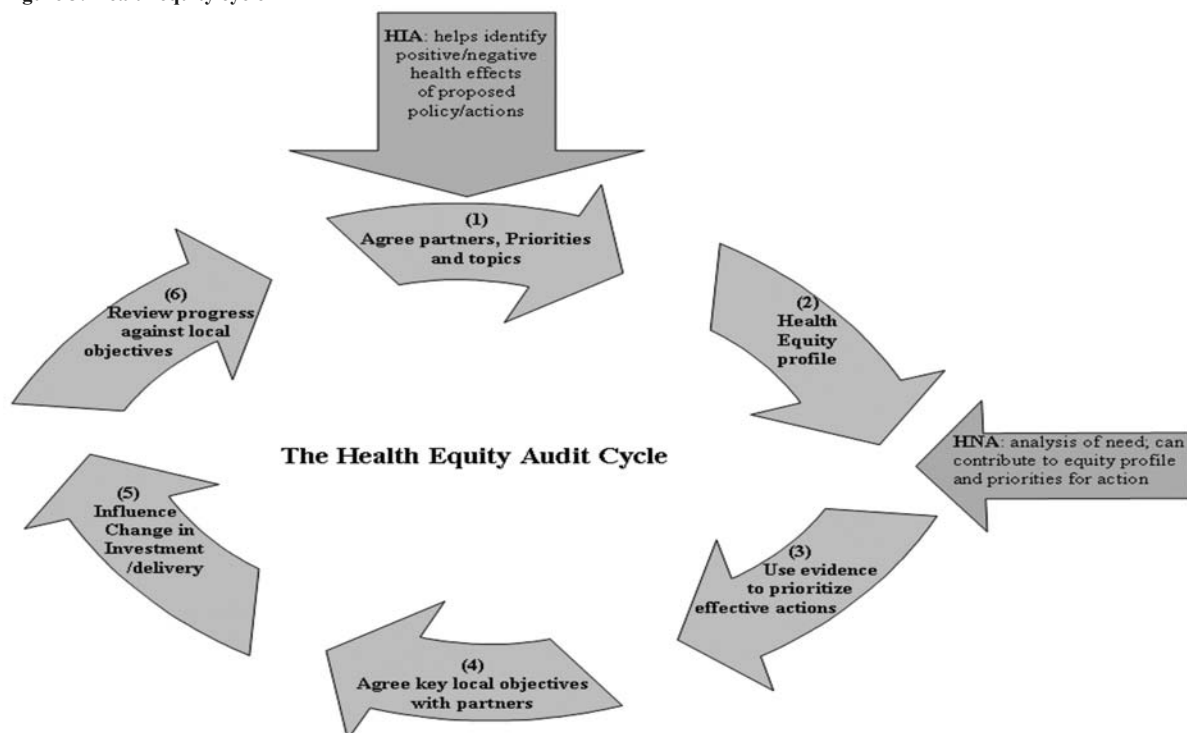
- How to monitor and evaluate so that you know whether the changes introduced are having the desired effect
- Why you are doing the evaluation, who it is for and how it will be used
- Involving service providers, service users and carers, funders and other stakeholders in planning the evaluation
- Ensuring all the relevant information for the evaluation will be available to you when you need it
- The most appropriate methodology for the evaluation
- Whether the evaluation can be done internally or by an external consultant

End Piece: Getting the most from HNAs

The overriding benefit of comprehensive HNA is its ability to take into account all of the perspectives (normative, felt /expressed needs; epidemiology and comparative aspects) and generate balanced recommendations. This comprehensive approach is often impractical because it tends to be time consuming and requires considerable technical expertise. In practice, some organizations address these problems by limiting HNA to one or two of the perspectives, typically public, patient and carer involvement or professional/corporate approach. Restricting HNA in to one or two perspectives only is a dangerous practice and will inevitably produce unbalanced and inefficient decisions that do not meet population needs.

Given the expert time and resource requirements, the HNA process/components may complement and would ideally be integrated with other resource intensive health services prioritization/investigation tools. Typically HNA process may overlap and feed into health equity audits and/or health impact assessments (figure 3).

Figure 3: Health equity cycle



Source: London Health Observatory

References

1. Wright J. Assessing health needs. In: Pencheon D. *Oxford Handbook of Public Health Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001
2. Effective Interventions Unit. *Needs Assessment: A Practical Guide to Assessing Local Needs for Services for Drug Users*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive:2004. [online] available from <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/01/18783/32014> [Accessed April 2007].

Resources (for further reading)

1. Stevens A, Raftery J, Mant J. An introduction to HCNA: The epidemiological approach to health care needs assessment. Available from <http://hcna.radcliffe-oxford.com/introframe.htm>
2. Powell J. Health needs assessment: A systematic approach. available from <http://www.library.nhs.uk/healthmanagement/>
3. The Health Needs Assessment Workbook by Hooper and Longworth available from <http://www.nice.org.uk/page.aspx?o=502009>
4. Health Needs Assessment: a practical guide available from <http://www.nice.org.uk/page.aspx?o=513203>
5. The BMJ collection of papers on health needs assessment: available from http://www.bmj.com/cgi/collection/needs_assessment