

Professionalising health technology assessment in South Africa

D Mueller,^{1,2} MEng, DEng; M Poluta,^{1,2} BSc (Elec Eng); M Brand,^{1,3} NDipEng, MBA (Strategy); N Mutshekwanne,¹ MB CHB, PGDipl (HTM)

¹ South African Health Technology Assessment Society

² University of Pretoria, Department of Public Health, South Africa

³ BRANDTECH Health Technology Consulting, South Africa

Corresponding author: D Mueller (dbmueller7@yahoo.de)

Health technology encompasses interventions developed to prevent, diagnose or treat medical conditions; promote health; provide rehabilitation or organise healthcare delivery. The intervention can be a test, device, medicine, vaccine, procedure, program or system.^[1] Health technology assessment (HTA) is a multidisciplinary evaluation process that assesses the properties of health technologies and interventions. It uses specific methods to determine the value of a health technology at different points in its lifecycle. The purpose of the HTA is to inform decision-making to promote equitable, efficient and high-quality health and health care systems.^[1,2] It bridges the gap between the realms of research, policy making and service delivery.

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Users of health technologies need evidence-based information regarding their clinical effectiveness, efficacy and safety to make informed decisions about adopting new interventions or treatments. This process involves considering all intended and unintended consequences of such a decision. Conversely, healthcare managers must understand the economic implications of adopting a health technology, considering both direct and indirect costs to allocate resources based on the comparative and cost-effectiveness of different technologies. Implementing this approach within health care institutions would facilitate the formation of multidisciplinary teams capable of participating in shared decision-making. HTA can provide information on the benefits, risks and costs of various treatment options, helping physicians and patients make informed collective decisions. This will improve the quality of services as well as ethical discourse regarding the adoption and use of technologies in clinical practice.

More than a decade ago, a survey on HTA in the country conducted among a cohort of practitioners and experts from public hospitals, provincial departments of health and academic institutions underscored the need for collaboration between health professionals and health managers from departments of health and academic institutions. This collaboration would establish an enabling environment that promotes the use of efficient, effective and relevant health technology in South Africa (SA).^[3] For instance, in SA, incorporating HTA into the decision-making processes of physicians can result in a more evidence-based and efficient health care system, ensuring that the limited resources are used wisely and that patients receive the most effective and cost-effective treatments available. Collaboration between

physicians, policymakers and researchers is essential for successful implementation. In the proposed National Health Insurance (NHI) legislation, HTA is explicitly identified and expected to have a prominent role in informing decisions about adoption and access to health interventions and technologies. In 2021, the National Department of Health in SA published a draft HTA methods guide aimed at informing the selection of medicines for inclusion in the SA national essential medicines list. This marked the first attempt to formalise HTA methods for decision-making within SA's public sector. The guide is designed to be used within the existing decision-making context and in future structures under NHI.^[4]

While SA currently lacks a formal national HTA institution, several public and private healthcare sector institutions use elements of HTA to varying extents to inform access and resource allocation decisions. In addition, there are research and academic institutions that are involved in teaching and research in this field. Institutions performing HTAs or related activities in SA^[5] include the National and Provincial Departments of Health; National Treasury; national organisations, such as the National Health Laboratory Service and Council for Medical Schemes; private organisations, such as medical scheme administrators, managed care organisations, private consultancies and private sector hospital groups; industries, such as pharmaceutical and devices companies; academic or research institutions, such as the University of Cape Town and University of Pretoria; clinical societies and associations like the SA Health Technology Assessment Society (SAHTAS); the Professional Society for Health Economics and Outcomes Research (ISPOR); Pharmaceutical & Technology Clinical Management Association (PTCMA); the SA Health Technologies Advocacy Coalition (SAHTAC). In addition, the

SA Health Product Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) plays a significant role as the regulatory authority in ensuring the safety, registration and market authorisation of health products in SA.

Current existing fragmented HTA processes need to coordinate and conform to a standardised, fit-for-purpose process and structure that can effectively inform priority setting under NHI and other relevant decisions. To ensure a comprehensive and inclusive implementation of this transformation, it will be necessary to allocate dedicated funding and regulation, establish strong oversight mechanisms and provide effective leadership. Transitioning from a multidisciplinary (a combination of various disciplines as independent and separate fields allowing practitioners to work within discipline-specific parameters and attain discipline-specific goals) or interdisciplinary approach (collaboration and interactions between disciplines that require organisational support infrastructure promoting work interdependence, increasing self-management and responsibility of team members), which emphasises the outcomes of interdisciplinary learning. Specifically, participation in learning and acquisition of knowledge and skills through collaborative work using a shared conceptual framework and integrating concepts, theories and approaches from the parent disciplines– will be essential.^[6]

This stakeholder group comprising health care managers, medical practitioners and others, as well as the broader society,

can no longer stand on the periphery of healthcare decision-making and should be prepared to engage at any stage of the HT management continuum and invest in familiarising themselves with HTA methods and processes. Hence, SAHTAS, a professional association of HTA practitioners, invites like-minded organisations and individuals to join hands in a collaborative manner to share ideas to foster a truly transdisciplinary HTA profession and ensure its applicability in SA.

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