

The impact of the NIHR Health Technology Assessment Programme, 2003–13: a multi-method evaluation

The Health Technology Assessment (HTA) programme, established in 1993, is the largest and longest-running research programme of the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). Its purpose is to ensure that those who use, manage and provide care in the NHS have good quality information to make evidence-based decisions about health technologies. The HTA programme funds research on the effectiveness, costs and broader impact of health technologies.

Objective

RAND Europe assessed the impact of HTA-funded research and the HTA programme on patient health, clinical practice, health policy, economic activity and academic research. The study primarily assessed the impact arising from research between 2003–13, and also considered how the HTA programme could maintain and increase its impact in the future.

Results

Using data gathered through interviews, bibliometric analysis, a survey and 12 case studies involving HTA-funded research, we identified impacts in three areas:

- (i) the NHS
- (ii) the UK research system
- (iii) industry and the economy.

Impact on the NHS

We concluded that the HTA programme has a significant impact on patient care in the NHS through its funding of the clinical trials and evidence syntheses that underpin clinical guidelines produced by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). While we did not look at the uptake of this guidance by clinicians nationally, it follows that implementation would improve patient care. In addition to this, interviewees suggested that involvement in clinical trials helps to develop clinicians' skills.

Patients benefit from HTA-funded research as it provides an evidence base for health policy and clinical practice. HTA-funded research also expands patient choice through assessment of alternative treatments for similar conditions.

Impact on the research system

Overall, evidence suggests that the HTA programme is an important funder of clinical research in the UK and has played a significant role in building and retaining HTA research capacity in the UK. The programme supports the development of individual researchers' skills, the sharing of methods and expertise, and the growth of research networks.

Summary

- RAND Europe assessed the impact of the Health Technology Assessment (HTA) programme for the period 2003–13 using interviews, bibliometric analysis, a survey and case studies.
- Overall, the evaluation indicates that the HTA programme is having a positive impact on patient health, clinical practice, health policy, economic activity and academic research.
- The programme impacts on the NHS mainly by funding clinical trials and evidence syntheses that inform clinical guidelines.
- Case studies show that HTA research has had clear impacts on industry, primarily through the refinement of existing technologies and the identification of potential new markets.
- As a major clinical research funder, the HTA has helped build and support UK research capacity.
- Papers on HTA-funded research studies are cited at twice the expected level for their respective fields.
- To increase this impact further, the HTA should consider:
 - Providing targeted support for dissemination
 - Funding research on the short-term costs of implementing new technologies
 - Monitoring and evaluating the impact of patient and public involvement
 - Improving the transparency of its priority-setting process.

Academics, policymakers and those involved in the HTA programme view HTA-funded research as academically rigorous. Bibliometric analysis supports this finding, showing that papers relating to HTA-funded research studies are cited at twice the expected level for their respective fields. Using a different metric, some 29 per cent of HTA papers are among the top 10 per cent most cited in their field, nearly triple the expected proportion.

Impact on industry and the economy

The case studies demonstrate clear impacts on the pharmaceutical, diagnostic and device industries, primarily through the refinement of existing health technologies or the identification of potential new markets for health

technologies. The HTA programme prioritises research likely to produce patient benefit particularly where there is no commercial incentive and hence the research is unlikely to be pursued by industry. Important treatment improvements, identified by our case studies, support this claim.

The HTA programme and NICE have a joint impact on the pharmaceutical industry, as decisions taken by NICE (taking into account evidence from HTA-funded studies) determine which health technologies will be made available in the NHS.

In many instances, the HTA programme and health policy organisations such as NICE have a joint impact on health policy and clinical practice. For example, the HTA programme funds research that informs NICE technology assessment reports and NICE guidance, which in turn have an impact on clinical practice. Similarly, the HTA programme funds research on health screening interventions, which may lead to a National Screening Committee (NSC) pilot and, if the pilot is successful, full implementation.

While outside the scope of this study, quantifying the economic impact of the HTA programme has been previously undertaken.¹

Recommendations

Provide targeted support for dissemination

The vast majority of HTA-funded research is published in the HTA's journal, *Health Technology Assessment*, and a frequent route of wider dissemination is through NICE guidelines. However, interviewees noted that support for further dissemination, particularly through non-academic channels, is not a priority. In cases where study results warrant it and when dissemination is unlikely to otherwise occur because of the absence of obvious 'champions' or where there are established vested interests, the HTA programme could provide targeted support.

Consider funding research on the up-front costs of the implementation of new technologies

HTA research tends to focus on the recurring rather than up-front costs of the implementation of new interventions. Policymakers do not make decisions based exclusively on the

¹ e.g. Guthrie, S., Hafner, M., Bienkowska-Gibbs, T., & Wooding, S. 2015. *Returns on research funded under the NIHR HTA Programme: Economic analysis and case studies*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation. RR-666-DH. Forthcoming at: www.rand.org/t/RR666

long-term nature and cost effectiveness of healthcare interventions. Therefore, there is scope to increase the impact of HTA research by funding work on the effects of the implementation of new healthcare technologies or interventions in the NHS.

Monitor and evaluate the impact of PPI

The HTA has a long history of requiring patient and public involvement (PPI) in studies, but the impact of PPI on HTA-funded research is not clear, nor is it specifically monitored by the programme. There is thus scope to monitor and evaluate the impact of PPI on HTA-funded research to understand its value and importance.

Improve the transparency of the priority-setting process

The HTA programme uses a sophisticated priority-setting process to assess potential research topics, taking into account a wide range of stakeholder perspectives. However, it is often unclear where ideas for commissioned research originate and exactly how they evolve. Improvements to the transparency of the priority-setting process are therefore possible.

Maintain close relationships with NICE and the NSC

As the HTA programme's primary route to impact on the NHS is mediated through clinical guidelines, it is important that the programme should maintain its existing close relationships with other policymaking organisations.

Maintain flexible and supportive relationships with researchers

The HTA programme maintains oversight of the research that it sponsors throughout the funding period and offers support to researchers where appropriate. In some cases, this oversight and support has directly contributed to the successful completion of clinical trials.

Maintain the academic quality of research

Academics, policymakers and those involved in the HTA programme view HTA-funded research as academically rigorous. HTA-funded research provides evidence that underpins clinical guidelines. Therefore, it is essential that the programme maintains the academic quality of its research.

Continue to monitor the impact of the HTA programme

A sizeable proportion of the UK Department of Health's budget is spent on clinical research and it is important that the HTA programme continues to monitor its impact, in order to justify its use of resources.

This brief describes work documented in Guthrie S, Bienkowska-Gibbs T, Manville C, Pollitt A, Kirtley A, and Wooding S. 2015. The impact of the National Institute for Health Research Health Technology Assessment programme, 2003–13: a multimethod evaluation. *Health Technol Assess* 19(67):1–292. Available at: <http://www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/hta>. To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB9864. RAND Europe is a not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to help improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND Europe's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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