



Claire Collins, PhD, MSocSc, BSocSc, Dip Stat
claire.collins@icgp.ie

35 – Health Needs Assessment

Claire Collins, PhD, MSocSc,
BSocSc, Dip Stats
Irish College of General
Practitioners, Dublin, Ireland

What is a HNA?

“Health needs assessment (HNA) is a systematic method for reviewing the health issues facing a population, leading to agreed priorities and resource allocation that will improve health and reduce inequalities” (NICE, 2005). It is not only the process of identifying the health needs in the community but also an exploration of all the resources involved - how they are used and how they could better be used - and where they are lacking. It is used to inform decision making and should lead to change which benefits the health of the target population, usually within finite resources – it is therefore necessary to be realistic about what you are capable of achieving from a practical, clinical and economic position. It is important to consider that many factors influence health and therefore numerous individuals, groups and institutions/bodies have a role to play in the health arena.

It is accepted that a HNA will produce benefits on multiple levels; these may include:

- strengthening community involvement in decision making
- improved public/patient participation in planning services
- improved team and partnership working
- professional development of skills and experience
- increased understanding of local health issues
- improved patient care/improved health of people in your community/practice
- improved communication with other agencies and the public
- demonstrate the reasons for decisions about health care
- better use of resources, services and people.

What Does a HNA Involve?

The steps involved in a HNA are outlined in many toolkits – Figure 1 outlines the five key steps from one of these (NICE, 2005).

In brief, data collection in a HNA in primary care will likely include existing practice data, routinely available local statistics, a patient/public consultation exercise, and a mechanism to obtain public and professional perspectives on need. The latter two may include such activities as questionnaire surveys, interviews, focus groups, casework information and observations.

It will most likely be necessary to determine need priorities in consultation; questions which may help this process relate to the numbers affected (absolute or comparatively), equity, impact, changeability, availability of effective and appropriate

interventions, the provision of adequate services, the existence of expertise, local and national priorities/strategies, acceptability and resource feasibility.

Planning and implementing actions is the most important part of a HNA and involves setting clear aim(s) and objectives, agreeing a shortlist of potentially effective interventions or actions and specifying the resources required (people, space, time and equipment).

Evaluating successes and failures and continuous monitoring are part of the process. Effective outcome evaluation requires setting indicators (measures against which to monitor progress) and targets (the level of outcome you want to achieve, for whom and by when).

Guiding Principles and Notes for Primary Care

The many authors who have written on the subject take different theoretical perspectives and propose diverse approaches. Furthermore, a HNA may be conducted at different levels (European, national, local, individual etc). However, the guiding principles when conducting a HNA are:

- Be clear about your aim(s) from the very start as this will determine your approach.
- The negotiations leading up to a needs assessment are important to determine what sort of evidence of 'neediness' you will have to demonstrate to convince decision makers.
- There are many different concepts of 'need' e.g. felt need, expressed need etc.
- Different information sources and methods of investigation tell you about different aspects of 'need' – a mix of sources/methods will build a broader picture of need.
- The way you undertake a needs assessment is important and ideally you should use a method that allows you to start to work on the solution to a problem while you are assessing it.
- The needs assessment should be owned by the people who will have to implement the actions.
- Health needs assessment should fit in with the appropriate decision making/planning system e.g. team, local, regional etc.
- Health needs assessment is not an end in itself but a means to help plan the future.
- Health needs assessment is a part of a cyclical process and should include an evaluation of how the needs have been met and not met by the actions taken.

Kilduff et al (1998) highlight the need for primary health care teams (PHCTs) to understand their stage of development and how this will directly affect any health needs assessment, and discusses the place of health needs assessment within the general processes and systems of the PHCT. A diagnostic and development tool, which links together the intimate relationships between five stages of development needed for effective primary care-oriented health needs assessment work, is outlined. The BMJ has produced a series of six articles on HNA which give a useful overview and direction, and contain many useful references for further and directed reading. Of particular interest for primary care is the first of these articles which points to the importance of distinguishing between individual needs and the wider needs of the community in the planning and provision of local health services; ignoring these needs can lead to a top-down approach to providing health services, which relies too heavily on what a few people perceive to be the needs of the population rather than what they actually are. The third article moves HNA from theory to practice; it notes that the assessment of individual's needs may form part of the assessment of a population's needs and outlines the circumstances favouring individual needs assessment for planning purposes. The fourth article in the series focuses on HNA in primary care (albeit in the UK) and identifies the different levels at which a HNA might be conducted and the related approaches and methods. The fifth article in the series highlights the importance of and scope for greater consultation with the general public and with current users about needs and priorities. It points to a need to acknowledge limitations to professional knowledge as well as to respond to inequalities in health (BMJ, 1998).

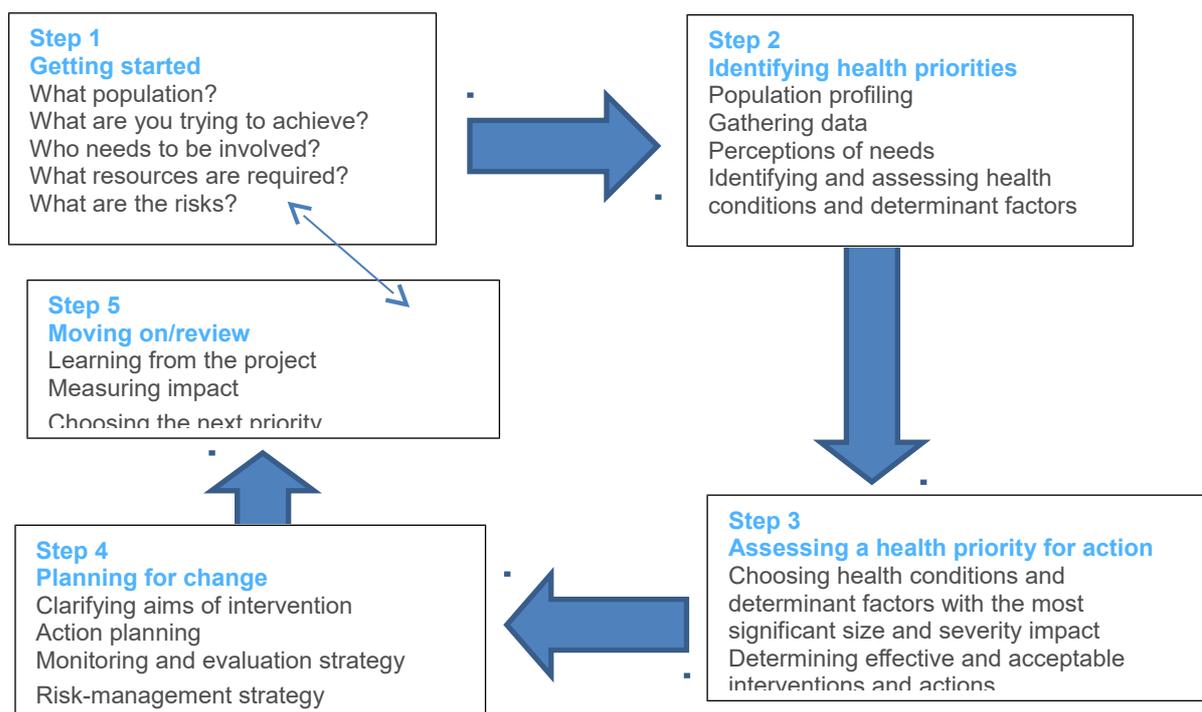


Figure 1: The five steps of health needs assessment

Take Home Messages

- HNA is an approach that helps plan services that tackle ‘needs’ rather than just reacting to demands.
- HNA is a multidisciplinary and multisectoral activity and consultation is a key component.
- HNA is not only about assessment but also about taking action to improve the health of the population.
- Aim for small, achievable, measurable goals; this increases the chance of success.
- HNA is not an end in itself.

Original Abstract

<http://www.woncaeurope.org/content/theme-b-needs-assessment-general-practice-family-medicine>

References

- BMJ. Series of articles on ‘Health needs assessment’ online: *BMJ* 1998; 316 (April to June 1998): <http://www.bmj.com/content/316/>
- Gillam, S. & Murray, S. (1996). *Needs assessment in general practice*. London: RCGP occasional paper.
- Harris A. (1997) (ed). *Needs to Know: a guide to needs assessment for primary care* London: Churchill Livingstone.
- Hooper J, Longworth F (1997). *Health needs assessment in primary care. A workbook for primary health care teams*. Calderdale and Kirklees Health Authority.
- Kilduff A, McKeown K, Crowther A. Health needs assessment in primary care: the evolution of a practical public health approach. *Public Health*. 1998 May;112(3):175-81.PMID:9629025.
- NICE (2005) *Health Needs Assessment: a Practical Guide*. http://www.gserve.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/documents/Health_Needs_Assessment_A_Practical_Guide.pdf
- Scottish Needs Assessment Programme (1998) *Needs Assessment in Primary Care: A Rough Guide*. Glasgow.
- WHO Community health needs assessment (2001) An introductory guide for the family health nurse in Europe. http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/102249/E73494.pdf