BOOK REVIEWS

Making Choices in Health: WHO Guide to Cost Effectiveness Analysis


Clinicians, academics, funders, policy makers, consumers and ethicists have all been sensitised to the need for evidence when making decisions in the adoption of health interventions. Evidence-based medicine relies on comprehensive analysis of scientifically valid studies covering sufficient subjects, with the proviso that both positive and negative results have been included in the analytical process. However, all this is not enough: to ultimately decide whether or not to adopt an intervention one is also obliged to consider the health economics of the situation. Whether introducing an intervention where none existed before, adding a second to complement an existing intervention, or seeking the right balance in terms of competing interventions, one needs to fully understand the dimensions of cost and effectiveness.

This WHO Guide to Cost Effectiveness Analysis is an eminently readable text that not only covers basic concepts for the novice who is simply seeking to understand the field, but also provides a set of background papers and applications. These include scientific papers by international experts in the fields of population modelling, communicating cost-effectiveness results to decision makers, and examples of specific health interventions. A mini-CD is also included with the book, and this will provide hands-on experience for those who wish to actually process cost data, calculate the effectiveness of interventions for a standardised population, or understand levels of uncertainty around costs and effects.

For the average reader, the first half of the book will be of great value in developing an understanding of how to rank interventions and decide on appropriate cost-effective mixes for a given set of conditions in a specific environment. Cost estimation is covered in detail, as is the full estimation of health effects. Yes, there may well be more comprehensive health economics reference sources that give much more in the way of definitions and alternative methods of determining impact of interventions, but this is certainly one that will not intimidate the uninitiated and will also appeal to the more advanced user.

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Controlling Disease due to Helminth Infections


This should be a handbook for health professionals and administrators who are working in child, women’s, school, public and environmental health. For specialists in education, it explains how worm infestation can impair learning, and why the school system is a key to implementation of control. It is school-age children and young women who carry the greatest burden of morbidity and disease due to infestation by parasitic worms. The planning, implementation, management and monitoring of control and prevention are described. That success is feasible has been proved by Japan and Korea, and other countries are making substantial progress.

This book is also about World Health Assembly resolution 54.19 of May 2001, which South Africa supported. It calls on member states to control soil-transmitted helminthiasis and schistosomiasis. One target is that there should be regular deworming of at least 75% of school-age children by 2010 because this is the quickest way to counter morbidity and improve learning. School-based treatment frequency should be determined by the degree of exposure to infection through lack of sanitation. However, South Africa still has no national control programme or achievable policy. Red tape and bureaucracy are frustrating attempts to initiate control. Strictly speaking, school-based, mass deworming may be illegal. The same goes for buying anthelmintics for as little as 11 cents a dose offshore, as advocated by WHO. One of the anthelmintics of choice, which is completely safe, is a schedule 4 medicine. This may be more profitable but blocks lawful use for non-selective deworming. It is fundamental that the main-line anthelmintics are safe for use in young children and after the first trimester of pregnancy but this is not in the package inserts. This disinformation by the pharmaceutical industry has a strong negative influence on paramedics and lay people who have to implement deworming.

Unfortunately there are serious typographical errors in the first edition, especially in some tables and figures. There also appears to be a conflict of interest in favour of albendazole in the chapter on anthelmintics, by John Horton.

John Fincham