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### **Including consumers in health technology assessment: a methodological proposal.**

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#### **Abstract**

There is general agreement that consumers should play a role in medical decision making, including Health Technology Assessment (HTA). Political and ethical reasons, social pressure, and effectiveness criteria support this trend. The challenge is to find a useful way of including consumers' perspectives, given the complexity of the HTA process, the variety of patients' clinical and social situations and the variation in their values and preferences.

To date, the most usual way of including consumers in the HTA process has been to invite patient-consumer associations to participate in assessment committees. On the few occasions they accept the invitation, they are expected either to behave like medical experts or to express agreement to or rejection of statements about technology use and its consequences. The information thus provided has been poor and seldom useful to the HTA process. It may confirm assumed theoretical schemes but rarely points in new directions. The main limitation is that these approaches provide a too narrow frame for consumers to express their ideas, feelings, beliefs, and preferences. User insight may influence the appraisal of outcomes of a specific technology within a particular economic, political, social and cultural context. However such information is rarely available to decision makers, researchers and physicians.

Qualitative methods of research can be used to include users' perspectives in HTA. This theoretical approach involves a wider framework focused on people's subjective reality told in their own words. Consumers are not bound to a closed structure of questions and answers. The purpose is to reproduce the social discourse about the use of a technology. Social profiles of the study population of consumers are defined according to a set of sociodemographic variables. A representative of each profile is selected as a spokesperson for that group, and requested to provide his/her point of view on the topic. The whole social discourse of the consumer population, obtained by the interaction between different profiles, is submitted to a semiologic analysis to determine users' concerns about the use and consequences of a specific technology. A brief description of the most powerful of these techniques, discussion groups, will be presented to illustrate this statement .

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