



“PRIORITIES OF HEALTH ECONOMICS IN AFRICA”

Inaugural Conference of the African Health Economics and Policy Association (AfHEA)
10th – 12th March 2009 - Accra, Ghana

Parallel session 1: Economic evaluation

PS 01/9

Economic Evaluation of Flying Doctor Services in KZN – South Africa

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Background and aim

Differential access to clinical specialist care remains an important cause of inequities in health outcomes. South Africa is considering the use of outreach by specialists and other cadres of workers to improve access to care. Policy makers require a good understanding of the opportunity costs incurred by this form of intervention. We therefore conducted an economic evaluation of a specialist air outreach programme in a rural province in South Africa in 2004.

Methods

This economic evaluation focused on providers costs and compared two strategies for the delivery of specialist care for rural districts in South Africa. Strategy A was based upon the existing programme and consisted of flying specialists and other health care staff not available in district hospitals. Outreach services are organised by an NGO and includes paid public sector health workers and volunteers from the private sector. Strategy B was modelled: 17% of patients seen in strategy A would not receive any service, 83% would be referred to secondary and tertiary hospitals for consultation or admission and 7% of patients referred would have road ambulance transport. Three outcome measures were identified: the total cost of each alternative, the cost per patient serviced and the number of patients not receiving services.

Findings

The air outreach strategy services was 47% cheaper than Strategy B, explained by the higher cost of consultations and admissions at higher levels of care, and by the avoided cost of ambulance transport. Other probable savings attributable to the outreach services are not included: savings linked to earlier diagnosis and treatment and improvements in overall quality of care in visited hospitals due to support-training provided by outreach, savings for patients and relatives.

Important factors contributed to these results:

- High density of the rural population combined with the number of hospitals visited increases the efficiency of the outreach services.
- Detailed assessment of needs and gaps to improve optimal deployment, medium term planning and controlled growth.
- Efficient co-ordination with visiting specialists and district hospitals
- Air service enables visits in 1 day, reducing staff costs and facilitating involvement of volunteers from the private sector