

THE AAATE 2008 International Workshop

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The 2008 AAATE International Workshop *“Socio economic assessment of Assistive Technology in service delivery practice”* was held in Milano, Italy, on September 25-26, with an attendance of over 50 experts from Europe (Austria, Belgium, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands), overseas (USA) and down under (Australia). It was organized by the Biomedical Technology Department of Fondazione Don Gnocchi Onlus, the largest private non-profit organization in the field of disability and rehabilitation in Italy.

The workshop was a very fruitful and effective interdisciplinary event, giving the opportunity to all participants to learn from each other's experience, to investigate how socio-economic assessment mechanisms could be integrated into service delivery practice, and to discuss possible roadmaps for all actors involved, including the AAATE, to promote advancement in this field.

The idea of this workshop stemmed from today's increasing demand for evidence of the cost-effectiveness of assistive technologies. Policy makers and financing agencies need such information to properly allocate resources, control how efficiently they are used, stimulate the market, identify priority areas for research, understand possible wider implications at an overall societal level; professionals working in health care and social services – within today's climate of accountability calling for evidence based practice - need to know whether their AT choices have proved effective within the rehabilitation programme, useful for the client, and efficient in using resources; industrialists need evidence of the added value their products or services may offer in comparison to those of other competitors; users and user organisations require to be fully involved in decision making processes and bring their expertise in this discussion.

The workshop consisted of three sessions.

The first session (*Issues and challenges*), chaired by AAATE Board Member Pierluigi Emiliani, investigated the foundations of the subject, by addressing the general issues and the main challenges related to the applications of cost effectiveness assessment methods/techniques in service delivery practice, in policies development and in market strategies. Speakers included Jan Persson from Sweden (*Cost-effectiveness of AT: applications and importance in policy development*), Lorenzo Mantovani from the International Society for Pharmacoeconomics and Outcomes Research (*Evidence of AT outcomes: what can we learn from pharmacoeconomics*), Renzo Andrich from Italy (*The AT cost side: how to measure the social cost of AT interventions ?*), Gert Jan Geldelblom from The Netherlands (*Outcomes assessment: the missing link*) and François Junique from the Unit ICT for inclusion of the European Commission, Information Society & Media DG (*Assistive Technology - a bright future in Europe?*).

The second session (*National experiences*), chaired by AAATE Board Member Evert-Jan Hoogerwerf, presented practical examples of how socio-economic assessment has been implemented in service delivery practice at national or regional level in various Countries .

Contributors included Ulf Keijer from Sweden (*Assistive Technology in the Ordinary Living. Cost and benefit studies*), Ingrid Schraner from Australia (*Issues with cost-effectiveness analyses of AT based on the ICF*), Valerio Gower from Italy (*Economic models for AT service delivery*), Ricard Barberà from Spain (*Assistive products in Home Assistive Services: analysis of costs and benefits*), James Lenker from the United States (*AT-ISI: a tool for quantifying mobility-related AT devices and services*) and Aoife Callan from Ireland (*Willingness to Pay for Technology: Findings from an Irish Pilot Study*).

The third session (*The way forwards*), chaired by the Workshop Chair Renzo Andrich, consisted of a brainstorming where all participants had the opportunity to contribute. It attempted to identify research priorities and recommendations for possible future actions at national, European or international level that could help improve the quality of AT service delivery systems.

Several areas were detected as needing more understanding and scientific evidence, such as: AT for people with dementia; ethical & privacy issues related to AT; success factors in the use of AT (when AT solutions work or not, why and for whom); prospective applications to AT of new emerging method in medical technology assessment; inventory and comparison of methods to carry out socio-economic assessment; what to do with the outcome measurement figures; how to transfer socio economic AT assessment methods to other Countries; the concept of "total" service delivery; measuring the costs/savings of keeping people (especially the elderly) at home Vs moving to institutional care facilities; better defining the concept of "benefit" in relation to cultural & economic factors; establishing hierarchies in benefits, either at individual or societal level; reliability of methods based on willingness to pay; methods for validating costs / outcomes analyses of interventions; what are the differences among the perspectives of users , market players, funders and society; societal impacts of AT technology (e.g. ability to cope with the decreasing labor force in the welfare area); prospective impact of the emerging virtual world (eg. secondlife) in opening new horizons for people with disabilities.

Some actions were identified as important and thus deserving investment: developing guidelines & standards for service delivery (minimum quality levels); developing guidelines & standard for researchers in the field, such as guidelines and checklists on reporting clinical trials; mapping the state of the art of research, so as to detect where knowledge is already solid or gaps still exist; involving housing organizations in this kind of research; building and maintaining a EU research network; funding a large scale EU research to collect and verify findings / experiences from the various EU countries, along with comparison data from the US; funding projects to develop assessment methods for AT developing countries; collaborating with the pharmacoeconomics environment.

The opening and the closing sessions included a message from the Italian Deputy Minister of Health Ferruccio Fazio, and speeches by the President of Fondazione Don Gnocchi Angelo Bazzari, the representative of the Health Department of the Region of Lombardy Grazia Conforti, the coordinator of the Biomedical Technology Department Furio Gramatica, the Workshop Chairperson Renzo Andrich and the AAATE President Anna-Liisa Salminen.

Satellite events included the AAATE General Assembly, the meeting of the AAATE National Contact Persons, and a visit to some facilities of Fondazione Don Gnocchi, namely the Biomedical Technology Department and the Smart Home of the DAT Occupational Therapy Department.

Overall, this workshop – the first one ever held tackling this subject in such a comprehensive manner – was a useful and inspiring event that will bring about significant advancement in this area.