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the Health Programme
of the European Union

Pro-Health 65+

Health promotion and prevention of risk – actions for seniors

Contract number: 20131210

Economic evaluation of health promotion and disease prevention for the elderly – methodological problems and challenges

Related to Work Package 7b

Description:	Project report for the 1 st Conference of Project “Pro Health 65+”
Version:	Partial report
Date:	21-09-2015
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Distribution level:	Not-Public / <i>please do not cite or circulate without permission of the authors</i>
Funding agency:	CHAFAEA

This report arises from the project Pro-Health65+ which has received funding from the European Union, in the framework of the Health Programme (2008-2013)

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ABSTRACT

The article examines to what extent economic evaluation techniques are appropriate to support decision-makers in the allocation of resources regarding health promotion activities for the elderly. We address the problem that the economic evaluation of health promotion activities is faced with methodological problems and challenges that limit comparability e.g. with economic evaluations of curative measures. Our central question is what special problems and challenges there are in the economic evaluation of health promotion activities especially for elderly people.

The article provides a short introduction to the basic principles of health economic evaluation and the characteristics of health promotion activities as objects of economic evaluations, and discusses specific problems in the application of these methods on activities aiming at older people. We identify as the main problems of cost-analysis the appropriate measurement and valuation of informal caregiver time, the measurement and valuation of productivity costs and costs incurred in added years of life. The main problems concerning the identification and measurement of outcomes are the long time horizon of the interventions and the long causal chains implied, the broad diversification of effects, the importance of social benefits and, in particular, problems in identifying outcome indicators that ensure a comparability of effects across different age groups. Above all, the widely used QALY is only of limited use for the elderly.

The key conclusion of the study is that a comparison of the effects of different health promotion initiatives between different age groups by means of economic evaluation is not feasible. A key problem is the identification or definition of appropriate outcome indicators that are directly connected with the formulated target of the intervention and (should) ensure the comparability of different measures.

The text concludes with some recommendations for the application of health economic evaluations of health promotion activities for older people.