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The Swiss Medical Board: a national centre of excellence in health technology assessment

The Swiss Medical Board (SMB) is a leading centre of excellence in health technology assessment. It evaluates preventive and diagnostic procedures and therapeutic interventions from a medical, financial, ethical and legal perspective, and uses the information to make recommendations to political decision makers, medical specialists and other service providers. In some cases, it also publishes information sheets for patients and other members of the public.

What is health technology assessment?

**Sources: WHO and EUnetHTA*

A health technology assessment (HTA) is a systematic review of the nature and effects of medical technology and interventions. It focuses both on the direct and intended consequences of this technology, and the indirect and unintended ones.

This approach provides the groundwork for health policy decisions, and in particular the best ways of allocating limited financial resources to medical interventions and technology. The assessment is carried out by interdisciplinary groups following a standardised review framework that takes account of clinical, epidemiological, financial and other methods and information.

Examples of medical interventions and technology include diagnostic techniques and treatments, medical devices, medications, rehabilitation and preventive methods, and organisational and support systems that provide healthcare.

Who is behind the Swiss Medical Board?

The Medical Board is backed by an association comprising the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Health Directors (GDK), the Swiss Academy of Medical Science (SAMW), the government of the Principality of Lichtenstein (RFL), the Swiss Association of Pharmaceutical Research companies (interpharma), and the health insurance federations santésuisse and curafutura.

In principle, the association is open to other corporate members that recognise and support its objectives. Any player in the Swiss healthcare sector, represented by its federations or

umbrella organisations, can become a member, and care is taken to ensure that the SMB is broadly based and representative.

How does the Swiss Medical Board operate?

The executive committee of the association decides on the issues it wishes to investigate, publishes recommendations, and lobbies for their implementation. This process is carried out by an assessment team of university institutions and an expert appraisal committee. These interdisciplinary bodies, which are independent of government, service providers, payers and manufacturers, produce specialist reports and assessments and formulate recommendations. Outside specialists and stakeholders are brought into the HTA process to deal with specific issues.

The HTA method primarily involves an objective analysis of the patient benefit, quality and efficacy of medical interventions, with a view to improving the quality of outcomes. In the context of rising health care costs, particular focus is placed on the efficient use of resources. Cost benefit analyses are used, and quality improvements are likely to result in lower costs.

The SMB can take up issues itself, or do so on behalf of third parties such as the Federal Health Department, cantons, and insurance companies. It does this in accordance with a statement of principles (see attached).

Its published recommendations do not have directly binding legal force, and their implementation is dependent on the willingness and support of the relevant decision-making bodies.

How does the Swiss Medical Board add value for the health sector?

The SMB takes a wide-ranging view of HTA, and enjoys broad support. It can deal with healthcare issues independently of legal restrictions, contracts, disease status and funding, and can analyse any suitable and relevant topics, including those that are controversial.

The SMB has a broad and balanced range of member organisations. It is independent, and places a high value on transparency, using flexible methods and processes to respond quickly to international best practice and focus on the healthcare benefits. It therefore chooses projects comparing different forms of alternative provision (see attached list). It also examines treatments which may or may not provide greater benefits than standard therapies, and evaluates whether the patient gain is greater than the side effects.

The SMB's strength lies in its comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach. It takes a holistic view, looking at medical, financial, ethical and legal aspects, including quality of life and the needs and values of patients and society as a whole. This enables it to analyse and choose the most suitable form of therapy.

How is the Swiss Medical Board financed?

The SMB is funded primarily on a project basis. Any player in the Swiss health sector can provide direct financial support for projects, or propose its own projects to the association. Each report takes around eighteen months, including scoping, assessment and appraisal, and costs approximately CHF 200,000.

Principles of the Swiss Medical Board

Vision

The Swiss Medical Board (SMB) is widely recognised as a national centre of excellence for health technology assessment. It uses scientifically grounded facts to provide decision makers in the health sector with the information they need. In so doing, it contributes to quality of care and efficient use of resources in the sector.

Mission

The SMB is committed to the best possible use of resources to provide optimal quality of care for patients.

It makes recommendations for decisions in the sector, analysing medical, ethical, financial, legal and social aspects of medical services and comparing desirable and undesirable effects, including benefits, risks, adverse events, and costs.

The SMB is transparent, and involves all stakeholders in the HTA process. It publishes guidelines and recommendations concerning its results, which can then be implemented on a voluntary basis. It uses additional measures to ensure that the recommendations are put into practice sustainably.

The SMB is free to choose the issues it wishes to review, including those that cannot be dealt with by an official performance committee. It primarily analyses sensitive areas and controversial medical interventions that have already been introduced.

The SMB works in accordance with balanced, scientifically based international standards. Its methods are carefully tailored to each individual issue.

Objectives

- The SMB's members are wide ranging, comprising associations of service providers such as hospitals and physicians, funding bodies such as health insurers and cantonments, the medicines industry, and citizen and patient representatives.
- It enjoys widespread acceptance.
- From 2018 onwards, at least two HTAs will be carried out each year for the Federal Office of Public Health FOPH as a strategic partner. This will involve coordination, assessment, appraisal, and recommendations to the office.
- Also from 2018, at least two other HTAs will be carried out each year for members or third parties.
- The results of HTAs are communicated widely and transparently. They have a measurable impact.
- From 2018 onwards, the operating funds will be provided on a project basis, either by

specific member organisations' contributions, or from third parties' project fees.

Strategy

The SMB's objectives are to be achieved using the following measures:

- By the end of 2017, it will be structured and professionalised to deal with the growing target volume of projects. This includes proper procedures, clear management lines, systematic project management, documented methods and processes, and a scientific secretariat.
- By the end of 2017, the Medical Board will sign a declaration of intent with the Federal Office of Public Health FOPH concerning its role as a strategic partner in HTAs for the federal government.
- Membership will gradually be expanded by the end of 2017 to include suitable players such as service providers' and patients' federations.
- The SMB's services and expertise are being widely publicised to encourage acceptance and gain contracts. From mid-2017 onwards, it will be systematically acquiring mandates, and the resources required to do this, such as brochures, are already available.
- The SMB focuses on themes that are systemically relevant to its strategy, and implements these in accordance with a three-year plan. It avoids duplication with issues being dealt with by the federal HTA programme.
- The SMB aims to ensure that the decisions made are implemented in the long term, and an impact analysis is carried out every three years to measure their effects.

Reports issued by the SMB at the end of 2016.

- Bariatric surgery for overweight patients – November 2016
- Acute or subacute lumbar radiculopathies due to discus hernias: conservative versus surgical treatment – July 2015
- CRT pacemakers for treatment of cardiac insufficiency – April 2015
- Oral or parenteral treatment of iron deficiency – October 2014
- Statins for the primary prevention of cardiovascular disease – November 2013
- Systematic mammography screening – December 2013
- Transferability to Switzerland of an HTA report by the IQWiG – An examination using the example of ezetimibe for hypercholesterolaemia – March 2013
- Computer tomography scanners in the investigation of coronary heart disease – February 2013
- Surgical therapy for liver metastases in colorectal carcinoma – December 2012
- Vertebroplasty and kyphoplasty in osteoporotic spinal column fractures – November 2011
- The value of PSA levels in early identification of prostatic carcinoma – October 2011
- Combined positron emission and computer tomography (PET/CT) in the diagnosis and staging of lung tumours – January 2011
- Antibiotic prophylaxis in elective surgery for inguinal hernias – January 2011
- Percutaneous, catheter-based repair of severe mitral valve insufficiency – December 2010
- Rupture of the anterior cruciate ligament: surgical or conservative treatment? – June 2009
- Use of bevacizumab in the treatment of metastasised cancer of the large intestine – April 2009

Topics being reviewed

- Efficacy of anti-dementia treatments
- Use and benefit of knee arthroscopy (for the Federal Office of Public Health FOPH)
- Robotics in the operating room