



Role of the referee for the NIHR HTA programme

Referees play a vital part in maintaining and improving the quality of the NIHR Health Technology Assessment (HTA) Programme.

The programme has five main stages:

- **Identifying** questions about health technologies which are of potential importance to the NHS
- **Prioritising** those technologies whose assessment will be most useful to the NHS
- **Commissioning** well-designed research, capable of being competently executed, which uses cost effective research protocols and answers identified research needs
- **Monitoring** commissioned research for timeliness, cost and relevance to original question
- **Publication** of all research in our journal *Health Technology Assessment*.

Types of referees

As well as needing input from referees with clinical expertise, the HTA programme also routinely seeks input from experts in:

- trial methodology
- systematic review methodology
- health economics
- statistics
- modelling
- diagnostic test evaluation
- screening
- epidemiology

The programme also regularly seeks the perspective of service users, in particular during the stages of prioritisation and commissioning.

Why we need experts

Prioritising

The HTA programme has six advisory panels which recommend which of the many research suggestions received through our identifying processes should be given priority. For each prioritised topic, a researcher prepares a vignette to inform the advisory panel of the importance of the research question for the NHS. The vignette will help the panel decide whether it should be a priority to take this research question forward, and possibly commission research. When preparing a vignette the panel researcher needs comments and feedback from experts in the field.

Commissioning

In any year, the HTA programme assesses proposals in well over 100 topic areas for primary research and evidence synthesis. Three members of the Commissioning Board are designated to assess the applications and report back to the full board for decision.

To aid the Board members, NETSCC HTA invites four expert referees per topic, and often a service user, to assess:

- the quality of the research proposed
- how adequately it addresses the research question presented in the commissioning brief
- how justifiable are the costs
- the adequacy of the composition of the research team and their capacity to undertake the work.

Referees are asked to complete, within three weeks, a standard HTA referee's assessment report form. 'Open' comments made are used as un-attributed feedback to the applicants. The Commissioning Board are greatly assisted by the referees' recommendations when deciding which applications to fund.

Monitoring

Occasionally the HTA programme needs to seek external advice on whether to fund project extensions for clinical trials.

Publication

The HTA programme usually sees 30/40 projects completed per year. We seek four external referees for each report (one of whom would have been suggested by the authors of the report). Referees are provided with a standard four-page assessment form.

We ask referees to:

- comment on the scientific merit and validity of the results
- comment on conclusions and recommendations
- assess the relevance of the finished report to the original commissioning brief and proposal.

A number of the reports we receive are Technology Assessment Reports produced on behalf of NICE.

Referee comments are considered by the report's Editor and anonymous comments are also fed back to the project authors.

The role of the external referee is crucial to the success of this programme, both by promoting scientific rigour and by ensuring that research commissioned has been successfully carried out. We work hard to ensure we do not overload our referees and you are always at liberty to decline any requests we make.