The Transferability of Economic Data: A Difficult Endeavor

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In this issue of the Journal, Drummond et al. present their report from the Task Force on Economic Data Transferability [1]. The findings and recommendations extend to 11, the number and scope of guidance documents on contemporary methodology and policy issues published in Value in Health. These methods guidance documents, representing the intellectual work of leaders in the field of economic evaluation and outcomes research, are intended to provide analysts with a summary of the pertinent problems and a clear set of best practice recommendations for research. The reports receive a great deal of open and often robust peer review at the ISPOR scientific meetings and through an additional formal review by a committee of academic, government, and industry scientists.

The Task Force considered the rather difficult questions of whether or not economic data can be transferred from one jurisdiction to another, and if so, under what conditions are the transferred data valid and useful. This subject has been addressed in previous publications but not to the extent and detail found in this report [2,3]. Transferability is of mounting interest because evolving Health Technology Assessment (HTA) programs are increasingly requesting localized economic data to support reimbursement and pricing decisions. It is simply impossible for sponsors of economic studies to undertake de novo research for each and every jurisdiction. In the instances in which transferability of economic data is acceptable, guidance as to how to (or not to) undertake such work has not been available. This report fills this important gap.

Some would suggest, perhaps strongly, that transferability of economic data is not possible and may lead to wrong conclusions about the value of a particular technology in a specific setting. The argument goes that questions posed by reimbursement authorities, the health-care systems and benefit packages, comparators, treatment strategies, target population characteristics, and relative prices of health care and labor inputs are so different as to make transferability unworkable. But, as the authors make clear, many of these differences can be measured and quantified and therefore can be modeled. Additionally, transferability across jurisdictions can create uncertainty in both model structure and parameter estimates. But uncertainty can be modeled, too. For those who support transferability, many of the methods issues simply reduce to a question of appropriate modeling.

A troubling observation, sadly common to most methods controversies, emerges from the report. There are few, if any, well-designed empirical studies directly addressing the specific methods issues raised by the Task Force. This fact, although not the fault of the authors, challenges their ability to make evidence-based recommendations to researchers.

We should applaud the authors of the Task Force report for clearly articulating the issues and setting forth recommendations for making the conduct of transferability of economic data feasible and more approachable to a wider audience. For jurisdictions with limited resources wishing to operate technology assessment programs, transferability may be a reasonable initial step toward an eventual policy of undertaking their own primary evidence generation and economic modeling. Nevertheless, and for reasons well understood by the authors, transferability is not always possible or even useful, reminding us that we need to exercise judgment before embarking on such efforts.

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References