

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING – MEASURING A HEALTH SYSTEM

Day C

Health systems are complex to measure and evaluate. Despite various efforts to identify simple indices to capture health status or health system performance, in reality, a wide variety of indicators are required with variable depth of detail in order to monitor and evaluate from the level of the health facility to that of the country's overall progress.

The problem in the early days of the South African Health Review (1995) was the dearth of data, regardless of quality. Now, although not all the data desired is available, the issues revolve primarily around data quality, definition, interpretation and dis-aggregation by suitable dimensions to unpack equity issues.

In 2000 no other comprehensive source of health statistics was available in the public domain and the logistical process of updating these data annually for the SAHR was becoming onerous. Thus the Health and Related Indicators online database was developed. In keeping with the philosophy of freedom of access, the system was developed entirely with open source tools and products (Apache, MySQL, PHP) and designed for low bandwidth situations. This database is part of an integrated web site including news, publications and events to provide a comprehensive resource base.

Mark Twain's words, "Facts are stubborn, but statistics are more pliable"; contain an important truth; statistics used to measure the health system are not an exact measurement. While Twain's quote may imply the manipulation of statistics, the context of the indicators database is presenting the best available estimates. Providing relevant metadata, caveats about the data and (where available) data from multiple sources delineates the range of uncertainty within which the 'fact' or 'truth' will lie.

The annual chapter on Indicators in the SAHR is a 'companion product' to the online database, with a focus on additional narrative and presentation tools to assist interpretation. "The chapter on indicators is of a very high standard because it is based on a comprehensive review of available sources, an intelligent appraisal of the data and is presented in an accessible manner." *Mark Colvin (CADRE)*

"This text provides a comprehensive and deep source of contemporary and relevant information about Public Health in South Africa." *Christine McGladdery (School for International Training: Public Health Program)*