

# SOUTH AFRICAN PRIMARY CARE CLINICAL PRACTICE GUIDELINE DEVELOPMENT: GAPS & OPPORTUNITIES

This policy brief addresses the following questions from the perspectives of national primary care guideline developers:

- What are the processes for national primary care guideline development?
- What are strengths and gaps in guideline-development processes and how can we enhance transparency and public trust in guideline development?

## WHY ARE PRIMARY CARE GUIDELINES IMPORTANT IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT?

Clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) are common tools used for policy and clinical practice. Guidelines inform clinical decisions at the bedside, governance of health facilities, health insurer and government spending, and patient choices.

South Africa's health sector is transitioning to Universal Health Coverage (UHC) funded through a National Health Insurance (NHI) system. The planned NHI aims to build on available primary healthcare initiatives to transform the previously segregated, inequitable services. Within these plans, guidelines are a named tool for supporting the delivery of equitable, standardised, evidence-informed, cost-effective care.

Our study undertook research on the current context and processes for South African primary care guideline development. We hope that what we have learned may inform improvements in guideline activities nationally.

## KEY ACTIONS FOR PRIMARY CARE GUIDELINE DEVELOPMENT

The key actions identified from the studies are listed below, with further details about the study methods and findings provided at the end of the brief.

National guideline developers had the following recommendations:

1. Strengthen coordination of guideline activities nationally.
2. Set minimum standards for all national guideline development and adaptation activities.
3. Allocate funds and resources for technical and administrative tasks required to develop high-quality, credible guidelines.
4. Build capacity for guideline development group members, technical support teams and methodologists, to keep up to date with global standards for development.
5. Put in place processes to manage actual and potential conflicts of interests.
6. Establish consultation processes that bridge: national guideline groups; national, provincial and district groups and implementers; private and public-sector role players including professional societies; developers, end-users and patients.

The World Health Organization (WHO) definition of a guideline suggests that it offers "recommendations for clinical practice or public health policy" with the aim of telling guideline end-users "what he or she can or should do in specific situations to achieve the best health outcomes possible". In this way a guideline can offer choices 'among different interventions or measures' that are known to positively impact health or the use of resources.

WHO Guideline for Guidelines Manual, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2014

This policy brief targets national and provincial policy makers, health managers, and healthcare providers with an interest in primary care clinical practice guideline development processes. The brief summarises qualitative research findings from interviews with national guideline development role players throughout South Africa.

These research findings are part of the South African Guidelines Excellence Project (SAGE). SAGE was a multi-partner collaborative project that aimed to explore South African primary care guideline development, implementation and capacity needs. Further information on SAGE can be found at <http://www.mrc.ac.za/intramural-research-units/Cochrane-SAGE>

The SAGE Guideline Toolkit is a repository of global guideline resources. This may be useful for those who want to find, appraise, develop, adapt, implement or evaluate guidelines. To access this free resource, go to: <https://guidelinetoolkit.org.za/>

# GUIDELINE DEVELOPMENT: PERSPECTIVES OF NATIONAL PRIMARY CARE GUIDELINE DEVELOPERS

## METHODS

Qualitative research methods were used. Interviews were conducted with 37 role players involved in primary care CPG development and implementation and/or use in four provinces in South Africa (Eastern Cape, Gauteng, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal). The in-depth interviews were analysed using thematic content analysis.

## FINDINGS

### CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY ROLE PLAYERS

Despite a committed guideline community wishing to address inequities, guideline development and implementation are affected by:

1. insufficient funding for technical and methodological work;
2. fragmentation between groups, and between national and provincial health sectors;
3. lack of standardised systems for CPG development and implementation;
4. resource gaps create an enabling environment for commercial interests or personal agendas; and,
5. no centrally coordinated CPG unit to address these needs.

**Recommendations from participants** suggested **six processes** should be strengthened to more effectively inform national primary care guideline development:

1. Systematic use of evidence following agreed **standards** to ensure trustworthy guidelines.
2. Enhanced **stakeholder consultation**, to create a better

understanding of end-users and patients' needs in development processes, ultimately to enhance guideline uptake.

3. Ensure **transparency** in processes and communication to avoid the view of guideline development as a 'big black box' and create credible guidance.
4. Build systems for better management of **interests** for conflict free, trustworthy guidelines;
5. Create systems for national **co-ordination** between guideline development groups to avoid duplication and support or endorse various national guideline players.
6. Consider the need for '**fit-for-context**' guidelines that consider unique health system, geographic and cultural factors in the different provinces.

### Citations:

1. Kredo T, Abrams A, Young T, Louw Q, Volmink J, Daniels K. Primary care clinical practice guidelines in South Africa: qualitative study exploring perspectives of national stakeholders. *BMC Health Serv Res* 2017;**17**(1):608. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5575947/pdf/12913\\_2017\\_Article\\_2546.pdf](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5575947/pdf/12913_2017_Article_2546.pdf)
2. Kredo T, Cooper S, Abrams A, Daniels K, Volmink J, Atkins S. National stakeholders' perceptions of the processes that inform the development of national clinical practice guidelines for primary healthcare in South Africa. *Health Res Policy Syst* 2018;(1):68. [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6069850/pdf/12961\\_2018\\_Article\\_348.pdf](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6069850/pdf/12961_2018_Article_348.pdf)

June 2019

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