Objectives
Comprehensive HTA reports include assessments of a technology regarding its benefit and cost, but also regarding ethical, legal, social, and organizational aspects. Legal aspects are rarely addressed in detail in HTA reports. Reasons mentioned include a lack of concepts and resources. Against this background, we examined whether indications of a systematic and pragmatic methodological processing of legal aspects could be inferred from German HTA reports.

Methods
Using the software MAXQDA, we extracted all sections of texts on approaches to addressing legal aspects from HTA reports published by the German HTA agency DIMDI between 2008 and 2017 and we performed a content analysis and summary. Firstly, we evaluated whether the research question of the HTA reports explicitly addressed legal aspects. If yes, we then evaluated whether the methods section reported information on the corresponding literature search, study selection and synthesis of results. We also evaluated whether and to what extent the results section reported results on legal aspects.

Results
DIMDI published 70 HTA reports between 2008 and 2017. Even though legal aspects were examined in most of the HTA reports, only 43 reports explicitly address legal aspects in their research question. In 32 of the 43 HTA reports, the search strategy contained a search block on legal aspects. 24 HTA reports specified inclusion criteria for publications on legal aspects. 9 HTA reports contained at least general details on information synthesis. Even though all 43 HTA reports explicitly mentioned legal aspects in their research question, only 38 contained a corresponding section in the results section. In this context, 21 noted that no information on legal aspects had been identified. In 14 HTA reports, the results on legal aspects did not exceed more than a page; only 3 contained more detailed results (see Figure 1).

Conclusions
However, in many cases, no or few details were provided on how the questions on the legal aspects of a technology were addressed, that is, what type of methodological approach was used – reproducing the approaches is thus hardly possible. The content analysis and summary of the processing of legal aspects did not provide a well-founded basis for future German HTA reports.

Contact: ulrich.siering@iqwig.de