Reviewer’s report

Title: Primary Health Services at District Level in South Africa: A Critique of the Primary Health Care Approach

Version: 1 Date: 4 February 2012

Reviewer: Alan Barnard

Reviewer’s report:

1. Does the debate present a novel argument, or a novel insight into existing work?
This is not a new idea or concept, but it is an important one which has broad application across all disciplines in South Africa and the world, especially the developing world.

2. Does the debate address an important problem of interest to a broad biomedical audience?
Yes – see above. All audiences should think of their patients/ research subjects/ services etc in the communities in which they operate, and not in isolation. The primary health care approach is an excellent framework for this and is not widely applied.

The main point is that the primary health care approach is not the same as primary care (first contact care) and this point is not made clear enough.

3. Is the piece well argued and referenced?
No. The point is clear to me as a primary care physician who is involved in primary care as a clinician and as an academic, but may be lost on a pure clinical or a pure academic audience. I am also especially aware of the distinction, and think that this article does little to clarify it. The way forward (strengthening of the district health system, excellent leadership (though the adjective ‘pertinent’ seems to be misguided) and health promotion/prevention in communities is stated quite well in the summary. This is the best part of the article and needs to be developed.

References seem OK, but some more recent publications, particularly in the role of oral health as a marker of a healthy community would be good.

4. Has the author used logical arguments and sound reasoning?
There is a logical flow in the argument, though there seems to be more of a collation of points made in the different references than the presentation of an argument. There are some poorly expressed ideas and one error at the top of page two (cut and pasted here: Primary Health Care (PHC) is the point of first contact that individuals have with a formal health system) - primary care is the point of first contact, primary health care is the approach in which all patients are ensured that their contexts, community needs from prevention to rehabilitation
are being considered by the clinician, system and service.

5. Is the piece written well enough for publication?

This piece is not well written with idiosyncratic use of language and some elements of redundancy of language and argument. It needs to be rewritten, with the help of an editor (from the start) and then it will make an important point and contribution to the development of health outcomes.

I suggest that the authors use their expertise as practitioners of oral health (such an important and under-estimated marker of healthy communities) to illustrate their argument, and perhaps to draw in a family physician or academic who shares their views about the difference between primary care and the primary health care approach. (Prof Steve Reid, <steve.reid@uct.ac.za> at the University of Cape Town would be able to refer them to someone in Kwazulu Natal). Dr Clemence Marimo chikacle@GMAIL.COM at the University of Zambia would also be an excellent source of advice and referral. He is an oral pathologist responsible for oral health in Zambia.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.