Reviewer's report

Title: The future prospects of Lithuanian family physicians: a 10-year forecasting study

Version: 1 Date: 14 August 2005

Reviewer: Donald Pathman

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General
I find this paper interesting and important because it provides a 15-year update on the family physician workforce in a country that started with none and has had a national policy to create a FP workforce de novo. The analytic approach is reasonable for the field and the data reasonably solid.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
It is striking that 85% of Lithuania’s FPs are women, yet this demographic was not mentioned in the supply side calculations. It should be. How should be retirement rates, work/non-work rates, mortality rates, productivity and other estimates be modified to account for the heavy female composition of the workforce (in the U.S., women physicians are much more likely not to be working or to work only part time, and even when working full-time they see fewer patients each day than male physicians).

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
I was confused in the abstract and throughout the manuscript about the “optimistic”, “medium” and “pessimistic” scenarios. It wasn’t until late in the paper that it became clear that three levels of both requirements and supply were used. This should be made clear in the abstract and early on in the body of the paper. Further, it seems inappropriate to me to call the Delphi approach the “optimistic” scenario, when theoretically the authors couldn’t have known if its estimates would prove higher or lower than the other estimates. Similarly how the other requirements would play out should not have been known in advance. Thus, it seems inappropriate to label them with their outcomes: instead why not simply refer to them as three requirement estimates each made with a different approach.
I find the Background section very interesting in the history it relates. Nevertheless, it is rather long and rambling. I suggest the authors recraft this into a shorter “Introduction” section followed by a “Background” section were more of the details of the history and trends can be placed. Alternatively, some of the trend details could be moved to the Discussion section.
The terms “retraining course” and “interruptive” residency need to be clarified for the reader when they are first introduced. I do not know what they are but they are central to understanding the paper and the authors’ recommendations.
No where in the paper is the reader told that current FPs are busy in their practices, that is the population wants to use their services and, presumably, there would be a demand for additional FPs in the future as advocated by the authors.
The reader would also benefit from learning something about how much primary care service is provided by Lithuania’s specialist physicians.

Page 3, bottom. It would be helpful to the reader to provide some international comparison data on FP per population ratios and overall physician per population ratios in Lithuania and other countries.

Page 4, second full paragraph. How are “services provided by family physicians” defined? What is a service? An office visit? A hospital visit too? A lab ordered?
Page 9. In this part of the Discussion the authors indicate which assumptions/estimates had the greatest effects on the estimates and which had little influence. This information should be presented in the Results section, preferably in some sort of table or figure so the reader can see for herself how estimates varied with changing the various parameters.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Page 6, middle of page. Please add a sentence or two about the Delphi approach, as most readers will not dig back to a previous paper to understand its methods.

Figure 1. It would help the reader to understand why there is a bend in the curves in 2008. Why does this happen?

Page 10, last paragraph. I am interested in the “non-financial incentive system” the authors envision. Examples?

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests