Reviewer's report

Title: The effectiveness of the Designated Research Team approach to building research capacity in primary care: A case study analysis

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Reviewer: Mark F Harris

Reviewer's report:

General
This deals with an important approach to research capacity building in British general practice. The study analyses mixed data from 6 primary care DRTs between 2000 and 2004.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
The Background provides an excellent overview of approaches to research capacity building especially in UK general practice. It concludes with Box 1 which describes examples of indicators built around the six principles for Research Capacity Building developed by Cooke. However the source of the indicators is not given. If these were developed by the authors, how was this done?

The sources of data are well described in the methods. However the approach to analysis is not described (apart from them being constructed around the 6 principles and the 6 DRTs). Case study methodology uses qualitative analytic methods underpinned by some theoretical basis such as social constructivist theory. There is also a synthesis stage when data across case studies is compared. It is important that greater detail is provided on the analytic framework and methods.

The results describe the teams under the framework of the 6 principles. This is a little disjointed, superficial and difficult to read and there is insufficient analysis of what determined whether a DRT performed more or less well under a particular principle. For example, under principle 1 skills and confidence, there a general statement of successful projects (and indicator of skill) being linked to a clear project idea, problem solving, promotion professional development and where there was organizational support. However the description of each case does not really illuminate this point. There needs to be a much tighter description of what the key factors were determining success under each principle followed by examples from each case (as well as any contrary examples).

The discussion is generally well written. However introduces some new ideas that I could not find supporting data for in the Results:—
"The development of linkages and collaborations also seems to have an impact on sustainability" (Page 14)
"Two themes seem particularly important in developing research capacity: the readiness in the teams and context within which the teams were situated, including enabling infrastructure" (Page 16)
While the boundary between results and discussion is more flexibly drawn in qualitative research it makes it more difficult to follow the line of argument in these instances.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
Table 1 is too detailed and should be shortened or put in an appendix.
I would agree with the statement (page 17) that “more traditional outcome indicators alone are not necessarily an accurate reflection of the effectiveness of particular approaches to capacity building” – it needs to be referenced or justified in some way.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
As these were teams, was there any effort to assess how well the DRTs functioned as teams? This is sometimes implied in some of the results. However it is would be useful to know if this affected the ability of the DRTs to perform under the 6 principles.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major
compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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