Reviewer’s report

Title: Assessments of mental capacity in psychiatric inpatients: a retrospective cohort study

Version: 1 Date: 26 February 2013

Reviewer: Paul S Appelbaum

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This paper presents the results of a retrospective study of assessments of mental capacity among inpatients hospitalized under the aegis of a large psychiatric program in England. The authors found a slow but steady increase over the study period in the incidence of capacity assessments, but no apparent impact of the new capacity legislation. Relatively few patients have documented capacity assessments, but there is no way of determining the appropriateness of the number based on this record review alone. The methods seem appropriate. A few suggestions that I would classify as discretionary:

1) Table 1 describes the characteristics of the study sample. It would be of interest for the authors to indicate those variables that are significantly associated with the likelihood of an evaluation being performed. That’s done for diagnosis and MHA category in Tables 3 and 4, but there’s no reason not to do it for the other variables. Moreover, in addition to bivariate analyses, the authors could offer a multivariate analysis of those characteristics most likely to be associated with an assessment. Analyses such as these may provide suggestive evidence regarding the appropriateness of the groups selected for assessment, and hints about other groups that should be targeted more frequently but are not.

2) A clearer statement by the authors of their views on who should receive such assessments would be helpful in putting these data into context. The manuscript currently suggests some ambivalence on their part, as they note both that universal assessments have been recommended but also that they would be costly, and they seem to fault the current low frequency of assessments. If it is evident to a clinician that a patient is clearly capable, is a formal assessment needed? Assuming informal estimation of patients’ capacity occurs routinely, must the conclusion that the patient is capable be documented? These questions are left hanging and the reader would benefit from having them addressed directly.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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