Reviewer's report

Title: Chlamydia screening in England: a qualitative study of the narrative behind the policy

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Reviewer: Julius Schachter

Reviewer's report:

This paper takes a superficial look at the introduction and evolution of the NCSP and then through a series of interviews with 14 players in this arena, and some document review, reaches the conclusion that the NCSP had not only an "explicit" goal (chlamydia control) but also an "implicit" goal (improving sexual health) that has not been appreciated. The screening program is one of great expectations, effort and costs, as well as criticisms. There have been perceived successes, and failures, and it is certain that the final score is not in.

Specific comments:

1. The authors go to some length to say how they avoided bias by making sure interviewees were aware of the interviewers' relationship with the NCSP. But what about the biases of their subjects, being interviewed 15 years later. What are the chances for selective recall, or a revisionist look at this particular history to justify what may now be perceived as an unpopular position. Does the "improve sexual health" goal reflect some after the fact justification?

2. Wasn't PID prevention a goal (only ectopic pregnancy and tubal factor infertility are mentioned, and PID is the immediate cost driver)?

3. While much criticism is discussed, the point that the NCSP was based on the best available data at the time is not stressed. What were the options to NCSP? Doing nothing?

4. Certainly the population based studies lowered the complication rates of chlamydial infection from those expected from earlier clinic based studies. But the impact of secular changes (outpatient management of PID, ectopic pregnancy) on measuring NCSP impact are not mentioned.

5. It is pointed out that there was much criticism of the early intervention studies. But the 2010 a trial in England of chlamydia screening reported a non-significant benefit of screening for reducing pelvic inflammatory disease is simply accepted. But that excellent study [ref 28] is also open to criticism (underpowered, surprising incidence of PID following recent chlamydial infection, inability to assure that control group had not participated in NCSP).

6. I recognize that some of these points are away from the main thrust of this paper, but surely this information provides the reader with a more balanced context.
7. What is meant by sexual health? Did the term have the same meaning in 1996 when NCSP was conceived as it did in 2010-2011 when interviews were performed? In reading the paper, I see a brief mention of reproductive health, places where the term seems to be defined by testing for STIs, but nowhere is there a comprehensive definition.

**Level of interest:** An exceptional article

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

none