Reviewer's report

Title: The potential for multi-disciplinary primary health care services to take action on the social determinants of health: actions and constraints

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Reviewer: Stephen Duckett

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Referee report Baum BMC Public Health

This paper reports on semi-structured interviews with staff in a range of primary care services in Australia. The paper is a timely one which examines factors influencing local services’ responses to social determinants of health.

The paper describes the response of staff to social determinants as exhibiting ‘reflexitivity’. I am not sure this case has been made, at least as I understand the term. Reflexivity requires more than simple reflection or understanding, rather it requires some form of two-way influence: cause yields an effect, and effect impacts the cause. I think what is demonstrated in this paper is that:

a. Staff recognise the impact of social determinants
b. (Some) staff recognise limitations on their freedom to act
c. (Some) staff practice is changed as a result of social determinants.

The authors need to be clearer about their conception of reflexitivity, and what they are drawing on. The Giddens reference is not a good source in this regard.

This issue comes up in a number of places:

• First sentence of ‘Results’ section in abstract. I think the term ‘reflexive’ is used as synonymous with ‘sceptical’ or like term, which it is not.
• 1st sentence on page 11. Term used appropriately here.
• Later in that paragraph it is noted that ‘These organisational environments, in the main, operated to restrict the agency of workers with respect to SDH...’ This suggests a low level of reflexitivity, not consistent with the abstract or later discussion.
• Last sentence of page 22. The term is used appropriately here but other references may be better.

Some of the quotes and interpretations may need further contextualisation. For example, the quote from ‘Worker, Service A’ on page 13 does not demonstrate ‘less awareness of social determinants’ but rather less awareness of the work of the Service. It is intimated that the worker is ‘younger and less experienced’ but this comment may also have been influenced by the role of the worker e.g. administrative vs clinical.

Also on page 13 is the comment that ‘Few alluded to the complexity of class and
power dynamics that underpinned the patterns of SDH’. I’m not sure about the methodological reasonableness of this comment. The research method was semi-structured interviews directed at ‘the role of PHC services in responding to SDH and the ways in which these understandings shaped practice’ (page 9). From this one could assume that questions were not asked about what aspect of power shapes/creates social determinants and so why is a comment not part of the research method included in the paper? The quantification (few) suggests that the authors expected more to have commented on this matter. What is the basis of that expectation? If this is an important issue, why was it not part of the research design?

The section ‘More than a place to deliver services’ starting on page 15 sits uneasily in this paper. The previous two sections are directly related to the research questions. If this section is to be retained the links to social determinants need to be made explicit in this paper.

The section, ‘Advocates for policy change’ starting page 17 raises a couple of issues. First, some of this section (e.g. first paragraph) appears to be a specific way in which services respond to social determinants, and so it may be best incorporated (and framed) in the previous section on this. Second, this section demonstrates that services are able to respond to social determinants and may appear to contradict (at least in part) the view that services can’t work in this space (as suggested earlier and in the next section).

The second quote in this section (page 18) and associated text seems to suggest that a focus on ‘sexual health’ is a response to ‘social determinants’, the topic of the whole paper. The link is possible to make but there are intermediate steps in the link which are not made here. Perhaps there are other quotes about sex roles or differential access to sexual health services which are more relevant?

The discussion on page 23 is important (especially in middle of the page) and could be expanded without making the article too long (even for an on-line journal), especially by eliminating sections that sit less well in this paper.

The sentence in this section beginning ‘Some workers noted that forms...’ is not inconsistent with the sentence on page 13 about the few (Total staff may equal ‘some’ plus ‘few’ plus others), but it is making an opposing point and some exploration of why the two views could be held simultaneously may be worth including (if something like the ‘few’ comment is retained).

Minor issues:
- Page 5. Insert ‘parts of’ or ‘some provinces in’ before Canada
- Page 10. Sentence before Findings needs fixing.
- Page 11, 1st paragraph. Inconsistent spelling of organization/al.