Reviewer's report

Title: The effect of out-of-pocket costs and financial rewards in a discrete choice experiment: an application to lifestyle programs.

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Reviewer: Eric Finkelstein

Reviewer's report:

I appreciate the authors efforts to address the issues raised by myself and the other reviewers. However, in several places I am not convinced by their responses. These include the following:

1. In response to my first comment, the authors note that the aim of their study is to disentangle possible differential effects of two different types of financial incentives. However, one 'incentive' is actually a cost, and not an incentive at all. Whereas the other is an actual incentive. Moreover, the authors claim that they chose to put the two in separate choice tasks because ‘in most situations people will either have to pay for a lifestyle program or will receive a financial incentive, but will not be exposed to both simultaneously’. I do not believe this statement to be true. Even in programs such as Jenny Craig, people pay for the program and receive discounts and other incentives for meeting goals. As 3rd party payers look to offset the cost of incentive programs, I suspect cost sharing is likely to increase. But even if I am wrong on this point, given that the authors are really comparing a pay-in (cost) to an incentive (benefit), as opposed to two incentives, I still do not understand why the two could not have been more appropriately compared in a single design.

2. In response to reply #2, I remain unconvinced that a financial reward ‘might have the opposite effect’ (the cosine story) and there is not a single empirical study I am aware that is consistent with this result. I appreciate the authors efforts to clarify some of the possible design effects, but I just do not find the result credible and believe it is likely driven by some unobserved bias.

3. In response to comment #3, the authors state that healthy patients would be unlikely to participate in a healthy lifestyle program and are therefore of limited interest. I disagree to both parts of this sentence. Healthy patients may be even more likely to participate in these types of programs in efforts to maintain their health. Moreover, if one wants to understand the cost implications of offering incentives, it is important to include all potential participants in the design, especially if healthy active participants may be obtaining an incentive for doing what they would have done irrespective of the program.

4. With a 27% response rate, the fact that non-responders and responders are similar on observables does not mean the results are unbiased. There is a reason that some respond and others do not. I do not believe one can generalize beyond responders given the low response rate.
Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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

Declaration of competing interests:

no competing interests