Reviewer's report

Title: Health Equity Research Gauge to assess the capacity of low and middle income countries for equity-oriented research: international survey

Version: 1 Date: 28 October 2005

Reviewer: Barbara Starfield

Reviewer's report:

General
This paper lacks the characteristics necessary to hold reader interest. Without any evidence that the method has any validity or reliability, or that all of this data (even if collected well) has any relationship to equity in health, it is difficult to justify the time it takes to wade through all the reported percentages.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

The paper needs to start with a definition of 'research' (how do we now that all respondents are responding to the same concept of 'research'?), a justification for the questions that are asked (i.e. the validity of the questions, the reliability of the data, and the nature of respondents and their comparability in understanding the concepts that are addressed.

Research is generally considered to be an endeavor that uses systematically collected data to contribute to knowledge and understanding. What is described in this paper is simply data collection, not knowledge generation.

Technical issues:
The definition of equity is given as a 'fair opportunity...'. What is a 'fair opportunity'? How is this definition related to this data collection effort? (Perhaps a definition that lends itself to measurement is given by the international Society for Equity in Health (see www.iseqh.org website)

Page 5 states that a Delphi process was used to rank order 'indicators'. What is the relationship of the 32 'indicators' to the 'broad questions', i.e. what are the 'broad questions'? If the 32 'indicators' are the 32 questions in Figure 1, then they are not really 'indicators' because there are no criteria for their interpretation.

Page 5 bottom: what is a 'direct' indicator? What is an example of a 'proxy indicator'? How can an 'indicator' be 'answered' (page 6)?

Page 6 top mentions feasibility but nothing before this mentions the issue of 'feasibility'.

Page 11 states that only 7 countries of the 12 stated that inequalities (inequities?) were a priority. If this is the case, how can the 5 countries answer any of the other questions?

The first sentence of the Conclusions is that the efforts of COHRED have 'succeeded'. What is the evidence of this? (There appears to be somewhat of a conflict of interest, as one of the co-authors is a director of COHRED, which makes it all the more important to provide evidence for the statement.)

Page 14 (second paragraph of Conclusions). Is it bad or good that 'the research agendas of some
countries may be driven by institutions created by COHRED (and other similar external agencies’? WHY?

The Acknowledgement section contains the names of some of the co-authors, which seems strange as just being a co-author is acknowledgement of involvement.

The references to the reports are useless without indicating how they can be accessed (website?) by readers.

The Title is confusing, since many readers will know that "Equity Gauges' is a very specific organizational structure. Why not simply indicate that this is a paper about Efforts to Collect Information Relevant to Equity?

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

ENHR should first be introduced in conjunction with the phrase Essential National Health Research (page 3)

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Reject because scientifically unsound

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests