Reviewer's report

Title: Identifying Strategies to Improve Access to Credible and Relevant Information for Public Health Professionals: A Qualitative Study

Version: 1  Date: 18 January 2006

Reviewer: Maureen Dobbins

Reviewer's report:

General
The submitted manuscript represents new and innovative work in the public health information needs area, and has the potential to spark considerable interest among relevant key stakeholders to become more involved and engaged in the information needs and management issues faced by public health decision-makers not only in the US, but worldwide.

The proposed research questions are new, innovative and clearly articulated, and knowledge gained from this study will contribute significantly to the literature in several fields. The authors have presented a succinct and comprehensive review of the background literature, and justified the need for conducting this research at this time.

The seven step research process is clearly articulated, thorough, and appropriate for the research questions. Some suggestions follow on how the methods section could be described in greater detail so as to facilitate replication of this work. The only section of this paper that I feel requires some improvements is in the discussion of the methods section. However, it is believed, despite these suggestions that the data collected are sound and well controlled.

The paper adheres to relevant standards for reporting and data deposition. The results, discussion and conclusion section of the paper were well written, and well substantiated by the data.

The title and abstract accurately convey what is depicted in the data, and presented in the results, discussion and conclusions. The paper is well written, logical, and understandable to a variety of audiences.

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

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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)

I think the methods section would be strengthened and flow better with some reorganization. For example, I think starting with the general overview of the research process through the various steps is appropriate. This should be followed by a discussion of the sample selection and recruitment, followed by details on data collection (ie, interviews and groups were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim and entered into a ?? software program for analysis). And then a discussion on data analysis. I would recommend this as a minor essential revision.

Then the further description of the various steps in the process might make the methods section...
hold together more. I found in each step, I was asking, did they audio-tape, and how was coding
done, because in each section the author would go on to describe what they did with the data and
how it informed the next step, so it appeared that a discussion of how the dated was collected, in
terms of audio-taping, and then how the analysis was done, was not included.

For the analysis section, it is recommended that these suggestions are labeled as Minor essential
revisions. With respect to the analysis, more detail is required specifically about how the analysis
was conducted. For example: How was the codebook developed, what process was used, was there
more than one reviewer, was the codebook revised along the way. Then who was involved in doing
the coding, one coder, or 2 or more independent reviewers who met to discuss their coding, and
resolve disagreements, how were disagreements resolved. How were themes developed, etc.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

For some of the steps in the research process, the following suggestions are made as discretionary
revisions:

Recruiting Process and Sample Selection

More detail concerning the type of PH worker sought to participate in the study. While we know
names were provided by the Directors of BCDC and CHP, it should be clearer at this point what
positions, job titles, decision-making level. Also, what percentage of people approached participated.

Step 2&3, The reader should be directed to the interview guide in an Appendix, early in this section,
and perhaps a sentence on the major topic areas covered in the interview provided in the text. As
well, some discussion on how the interview guide was developed, and pretested (if it was).

Same for the focus groups, Was there a specific guide used in the focus groups to guide the
questions, and if so, how was this developed and it should be included in appendix. How long was
the focus group, how were participants approached, who participated and who did not, and does this
affect the generalizablity (from a qualitative aspect), of the data collected.

For CHP group, if the interview guide is quite different might want to include that as well in appendix.
How long did these interviews take.

Results:

This is a discretionary revision. Include some additional information about the participants. (ie a table
of demographic info: position, years in position, role/responsibilities, types of decisions the
participant makes, years working in public health, educational background, etc)

The following suggestions for the discussion and conclusion are also discretionary revisions.

Discussion

In the paragraph that discusses health-evidence.ca, I think some additional sentences, following the
description of this product, around how this product specifically addresses identified needs, or not
should be included. Right now it is just introduced in a paragraph but not really discussed as to why
this product specifically has been highlighted over others that may exist.

In the conclusion section I think some more detailed recommendations about where to go from here
could/should be addressed. Given that there is a product that currently exists that partially addresses
the needs of PH decision-makers, what further recommendations can be made around not
duplicating what currently exists, but rather complement what exists, etc. Recommendations could
also be more specific about key stakeholders that need to become involved, resources that are
required, and further research that could be conducted to evaluate information systems.
What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

The only issue I feel it is necessary to declare is that I am the creator of the procure health-evidence.ca, which is identified and described in this paper. However, this does not have any financial implications for me personally, or my employer, McMaster University, since health-evidence.ca is a free service provided to all public health decision-makers worldwide.