Reviewer's report

Title: Can we assess public health systems capacity at the local level?

Version: 2 Date: 1 June 2009

Reviewer: Jacqueline Merrill

Reviewer's report:

Major compulsory revision.

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
Author states the problem—there is a gap in that little is known about local infrastructure and capacity but does not adequately address the significance—if we knew more what difference would it make?

Introduction is missing a review of the CDC National Public Health Performance Standards program in the US that has a well developed local assessment tool that has been tested for construct validity. The NPHPS local instrument has a broader focus than the CDC emergency response capacity tool, and there is a lot published on it.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
The methods are NOT well described. The manuscript does not conform to reporting conventions for a research study. The most well developed part of the manuscript is the background, but as mentioned above there is no clear statement of significance, nor is the purpose and objectives of the study clearly stated. No study design explicated, no research questions stated. The information in the introduction needs to set up the study—problem, significance of the problem, gaps that need research, other work to address gaps,

3. Are the data sound?
can't tell because the authors do not describe the data or how they were analyzed.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
NO
There is no description of the sample, selection criteria, or recruitment strategies
No description of who attended workshops, how they were selected, no description of those who were invited but declined to participate, no description of participant feedback (is this feedback the data that were analyzed?), or of how the data were analyzed. No methodological explanation of how the four categories of the self assessment tool were identified from the data.

How was the instrument piloted? With what organizations? What was the response rate? How many, how was the “participant feedback” gathered and
analyzed? Who are those “working in the field”? (page 10) was feedback gathered in any organized way?

What kind of decisions were made about how the tool should be formatted? How answers were captured? How do users of the tool know what the results mean, is there a way to compare? Is there a scoring mechanism? I suggest including the formatted tool as an appendix?

Results are blended in with words that belong in either methods or discussion. For example, much of page 11 should be in the discussion. “Refining the Tool” section is part of methods, not results.

In terms of results, I’m not sure exactly what the findings were. Was the tool implemented or just pilot tested? Construct validity? Need to clearly indicate next steps.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

The discussion is muddy. Needs to indicate how this research answered the research questions (which were never stated) and what it found that was significant and what are the implications of the findings.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

They are addressed but not in a crisp, orderly way. For example, the study has the following limitations: …

The self administration of the tool is a big limitation. Need to address this and to explain why.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

Yes but need more breadth in placing their work in context of what else is being done to document capacity of public health systems.

Also implications of this work are not well developed

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

The title is a rhetorical question. Should be more descriptive, for example “Qualitative development and pilot testing of a capacity assessment tool to improve local public health systems in Australia” or something like that

9. Is the writing acceptable? Grammar and syntax are fine, it’s the content that is the problem.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a
statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests