Reviewer's report

Title: Effectiveness of a quality management program in dental care practices

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Reviewer: Paul Batchelor

Reviewer's report:

This paper sets out to present the findings of a study to examine the impact of what the authors have termed is 'a quality management programme' for dental practices in Germany. Using a standardised questionnaire, what appears to be a structured assessment of premises and staff is undertaken around five themes.

The authors conclude that those practices which have implemented a quality management program had better organisational quality as compared with a comparison group although it is stated that the improvements were small and on-significant. The authors also identify several features that may account for the differences in the two groups that would limit the transferability of the work to a more generalizable audience. However, there are a number of shortcomings in the work that preclude a recommendation for publication, three of which are outlined below.

First, presently the paper does not add to the existing work on quality in dental care. Not least the authors have not provided an overall framework for the qualities of health care from widely differing perspectives that would enable the limited aspects examined to be placed in. The authors talk about 'quality management' but fail to provide a definition. Do they mean quality assurance arrangements or something else? The literature on this is considerable and should be used to provide a context for the specific areas that the authors are looking at.

Second, the authors use the European Practice Assessment tool. While references are given, the papers and web site provide details of the medical example. Medical and dental care provision is fundamentally different. How was the assessment tool modified? Where all aspects changed or were some consistent? For example, safety and finance are surely applicable to both primary care sectors but information may be different. This needs to be explained. The authors touch upon this in the discussion to some extent but do not explore the implications to any extent.

Third, for the statistical analyses the data are pooled from the dimensions. Why? The current proposal would seem to suggest that all the areas are of equal importance. Is safety the same as infrastructure? The authors report a statistical significance but not what the clinical implications actually are. Does the numerical score matter and why?

Overall, I cannot recommend the paper for publication. There are several quality
measures that various organisations operate throughout Europe. Given the
nebulose concept of quality, the implications, not least the costing of undertaking
the EPA process, must be provided to help address whether the resource
allocation to this approach can be justified through improvements in care
delivery.

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:

I declare that I have no competing interests