Reviewer's report

Title: Straining and navigating the soup: Using realistic evaluation to evaluate a major service re-configuration for end of life care patients in two English counties

Version: 1  Date: 20 November 2013

Reviewer: Jonathan Waite

Reviewer's report:

Major compulsory revisions

1. This paper contains much of interest for any evaluation of new service provision. A large part of the paper concerns the methodology and applicability of realistic (realist) evaluation. This is chiefly of interest to public health professionals and not directly to palliative care practitioners. I feel that this part of the publication might profitably be excised and submitted to a more relevant journal such as BMC Health Services Research.

2. There is very little data submitted to justify publication as a Research Article. Some basic demographic data on the population of the areas served by the novel interventions is needed to set the scene.

3. No indication is given of how patients were allocated to the "Delivering Choice" services. It was evidently decided that blinded randomised allocation was not to be used, but without some information on how the subjects for the intervention were selected it is impossible to tell how much of the reported improvements in outcome can plausibly be attributed to the intervention.

4. No consideration is given in the Discussion to the likley generalisability of the results. It is clear from some of the narrative that charismatic individuals and vested interests had a significant impact on the implementation of these services; one might speculate how the enthusiasm and "can-do" attitudes of the team may be eroded by burn-out, resignations, threats to the stability of funding etc and whether the changes in outcome achieved by the Delivering Choice programme can be sustained.

Minor Essential Revisions

Reference 10 does not contain sufficient information to enable it to be retrieved.

Figure 1 does not convey any meaning to me - it could be discarded.

Discretionary Revisions

Throughout the paper there terms are used in a technical sense without any explanation - a glossary explaining concepts such as "tacit knowledge" "front-of house", "snowball sampling" "helicopter view" "difference in difference analysis" would enable readers with a background in biomedical science and little awareness of sociological jargon to comprehend the authors' intentions. The term
"contextual" seems to be employed indiscriminantly for a number of concepts, apparently more to sound impressive than to convey any meaning. The use of the word "so" to prefix many sentences and the number of tautological adverbs also irritated this reviewer.

MOREcare & ADASTRA are referred to but not explained.

It is clear from the team's report (freely available on the internet) that the counties studied were North Somerset & Somerset. There seems no point in attempting to anonymise them in the coy "Mixedshire" & "Ruralshire".

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

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests