Reviewer's report

Title: Malnutrition and responsibility in elder care - high-level decision-makers' ethical reasoning

Version: 6 Date: 6 January 2010

Reviewer: Samia Hurst

Reviewer's report:

This is an interesting study, but its contextualisation and discussion need to be more focused and, in places, developed further.

Major compulsory revisions

• The introduction is rather wordy, and could be tightened considerably. The authors use broad notions in a sweeping manner without explaining their meaning, content, or relevance to the paper. Examples include “In the philosophy of ethics” (p 4) and “Improper nursing care related to nutritional issues should be discussed in light of the codes of ethics for nurses” (p 5).

• The methods section should include a description of how study participants were selected.

• There is some confusion in the discussion between the choice to comment on what HDMs said, and whether they were correct. The first is the more interesting aspect and I would recommend that it be a greater focus.

• Several results point to difficulties in situating responsibility for nutrition in elder care. HDMs are cited as placing responsibility on health care providers, and distrusting them when results are not as desired. They refer to the importance of ‘seeing the whole person’, something an HDM manifestly cannot do. The authors do stress on page 13 that staffing situations were hardly mentioned. They also discuss shifting responsibility to HCP, and to fatalism (p14), as well as HDMs’ ambiguous view of their own responsibility (p15). This seems to be one of the central findings of the study: it should be more clearly outlined and discussed.

• What would it imply to obtain “more equally and fairly distributed” ethical responsibility in this context? This point is interesting, but its content is currently unclear. A discussion of how the present study can contribute to understanding what this might mean, would also be useful.

Minor revisions:

• The table adds little to the text. I would advise either enriching it, for example by adding quotes from the dataset, or leaving it out altogether. Its title is also rather long.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English: Acceptable

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