Reviewer's report

Title: An Ethical Framework for Cardiac Report Cards

Version: 1 Date: 25 November 2004

Reviewer: Gail J Povar

Reviewer's report:

General

The authors address an interesting problem that is a challenge not only for CRCs but for health care delivery in general. The problem of specifying an ethical framework for such efforts is to be clear as to how that framework is to be applied: to collection of data? to reporting to data? to selection of criteria? to the use of data to arrive at evaluative statements? to the use of data to drive policy decisions, including reimbursement and allocation decisions. Each of these domains is somewhat different and specification of the ethical challenges each poses seems to be central to the task the authors have selected for themselves.

A rigorous discussion of these issues would be an important contribution to the literature.

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

I believe the paper could be significantly strengthened by a preliminary analysis acknowledging and parsing precisely the issues I outlined above in general comments.

I also think that it is imperative to distinguish between a consensus process to elicit shared values (which is what the authors have done) and ethical analysis and reasoning which is a more formal discipline. More specific detailing of the ethical principles that a priori undergird CRC report cards might help set the tone for the values discussion which follows.

Further, it would be helpful to understand whether the "ethical language" was applied to more informal statements among the delphi group, or whether the authors took the values articulated and then created the "moral" language afterwards. This latter method introduces much more of the authors voice into the process, and is really substantively different methodologically then if the delphi group used "moral" language and aggregated their perceptions into the different subheadings themselves.

Within the various "ethical dimensions" of the framework, there is significant room for clarification and improvement. For instance, the section of equity is very confusing. How should an ethical framework (for the construction? reporting?) of CRC report cards address their distribution among rural/urban settings? The argument that equity requires fair access to report cards makes sense. Similarly, reporting standards that help the consumer to understand the different individuals or institutions' challenges is essential to fairness -- an aspect of equity. But the comments regarding resource allocation, unqualified, simply are out of place.

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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)

--generally, the paper is well written, there are no minor revisions required.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

--The discussion of what constitutes legitimacy should ideally distinguish more clearly between
political legitimacy and moral legitimacy and scientific legitimacy. All three dimensions are subsumed in the article, actually, as the political is implied in "acceptability" and the scientific in the "quality of data" concerns. Moral legitimacy presumably relies on fairness of treatment of the subjects of the CRC report cards-- which includes both concepts of quality and fairness in analysis.

**What next?**: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

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

**Quality of written English**: Acceptable

**Statistical review**: No

**Declaration of competing interests**: I declare that I have no competing interests.