Reviewer’s report

Title: Ethical challenges related to elder care. High level decision-makers experiences

Version: 2 Date: 9 October 2006

Reviewer: Samia Hurst

Reviewer’s report:

General
This is a phenomenological-hermeneutic exploration of decisions related to elder care as experienced by political and civil servant high-level decision-makers at the municipality and county council level from two counties in Sweden. The investigators report dilemmas related to extensive care needs and working with limited budgets. Experience of ethical difficulties was associated with loneliness, uncertainty, lack of confirmation, as well as with the risk of being threatened or becoming a scapegoat. Respondents also reported difficult decision avoidance.

This study addresses an interesting topic, and uses a methodology appropriate to an initial exploratory study of complex phenomena.

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

1) The analysis process is very well described, and shows a robust understanding of the techniques that were used. However, two elements require further clarification. Data collection was done by interviews, but we are told very little of the kinds of questions that were asked. Open-ended interviews cannot, of course, be based on strict questions, but a few examples of the questions that were asked would be helpful. In addition, random sampling is not the ideal method of recruitment for this sort of study. The choice of random sampling thus requires a brief explanation.

2) The notion of relational ethics may need more clarification. For example, (p4) relational ethics can refer to how to honour relationships and preserve them. Not necessarily how to fulfil social roles and obligations...Furthermore, the authors draw equivalence between action ethics and dilemmas on the one hand, and between relational ethics and ethical challenges on the other hand: this is not supported in the text and is not intuitively straightforward. (P7) They may want either to further clarify this, or to drop this distinction.

3) What do the authors find to be the most important implications of their findings? I found that on reading the discussion, I lacked a clear overview of the impact of this study. This should be clarified.

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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)

1) A language edit would be helpful
2) P8: Was there a difference in the phenomenon of ethical dilemmas or in the reported experience of male and female respondents?
3) P3: A large amount of elder care is provided by family members. This should be reflected.
4) The term “justness” is not straightforward in English. Do the authors mean justice? Or fairness?

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1) Themes related to ethically difficult situation, such as loneliness, were linked to a striking feeling of powerlessness, despite being in charge, on the part of respondents. This may merit some comment, as may loneliness itself. For example, in our study of physician decisions in scarcity, we found that they talked with others about these decisions much more than we expected. (Hurst S., Chandros Hull S., DuVal G., Danis M.: Physicians’ Responses to Resource Constraints. Archives of Internal Medicine.
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: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No

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