Reviewer's report

Title: Prevention praised, cure preferred? Results of between-subjects experimental studies comparing (monetary) appreciation for preventive and curative interventions

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Reviewer: Jeffrey Kullgren

Reviewer's report:

This is an interesting manuscript that explores preferences for preventive vs. curative interventions, and seeks to identify factors that could explain these preferences. The methods are sound but the manuscript would benefit from revisions that improve the clarity of the background and methods in the areas identified below. Further, the authors should strongly consider expanding the discussion to give more direction to other researchers who seek to build on this work.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Page 2, Abstract Background: The motivation for this study could be laid out more clearly. For example, the statement “most economic studies use methods that put respondents in an ‘objective’ frame of mind” is vague (i.e., adding “within-subjects designs” does not necessarily clarify this). Is there another way to concisely define “an ‘objective’ frame of mind” or describe the motivation for the study?

2. Pages 4-8: The Background would be stronger if, for each of the potential mechanisms the authors identify, they concisely state how this factor could lead to (falsely) measured preferences for preventive interventions over treatment interventions.

3. Page 5, Paragraph 1: It is not clear to me that the key issue is asking subjects to be “objective” vs. “subjective.” Even in a between-subject design subjects could be asked to objectively assess the merits of a particular medical intervention, or even consider the potential trade-offs between a particular intervention and other uses of those resources. Is the key distinction whether the set-up is comparative or not (i.e., whether subjects are asked to explicitly consider other uses of resources)? This is unclear and I would implore the authors to be more precise in their exposition of the motivation for the study.

4. Page 5, Paragraph 1: I applaud the authors for considering how the phenomena they are studying could affect policy decisions. However, this set-up seems to argue that findings of previous studies that preventive interventions are preferred over treatment interventions is in part an artifact of study design, and a range of other factors can explain policy decisions. Thus, I would implore the authors to re-evaluate these passages following revision in the areas above. The
policy implications of the study questions are indeed important and may become more clear following these revisions.

5. Page 10, Paragraph 2: What is meant by “appreciation”? There should be a concise explanation of the primary outcome measure here (i.e., definition of “appreciation,” how this concept was measured, etc.).

6. Page 15, Paragraph 1: This passage is confusing and raises some questions about the study design, but I think this issue is probably an artifact of an incomplete explanation. From the previous exposition it appears that subjects were only asked to rate their appreciation for the respective scenario they were shown, but this section suggests otherwise. Further, the statement that “the preventive intervention was valued significantly more than the treatment intervention” seems to directly contradict the general finding that appreciation for the given scenario was higher in the treatment arm than in the prevention arm. Throughout the manuscript text, the actual scenarios that each group of participants were shown and when, and what each group of participants were asked about these scenarios and when, need to be much more clearly described.

7. Page 16, Paragraph 2: Why was Study 2 needed? What is the rationale for asking about an “anti-smoking pill” rather than a “quitting smoking course”?

8. Page 23, Paragraph 1: What would the authors suggest as future directions for research in this area (i.e., how should others build on this work)?

Minor Essential Revisions

9. Page 2, Abstract Results: Would be better to include some quantitative results here if space allows.

10. Page 7, Paragraph 1: The relative proportions of individuals who are treated “in vain” in prevention and treatment programs depends on the effectiveness and reach of interventions. Thus it is not accurate to say that more people are treated “in vain” in preventive programs.

11. Page 7, Paragraph 1: What about the fact that prevention programs generally reach more people than treatment programs because the number of people at risk for a disease is always more than the number of people who actually get the disease? Could it be that individuals have a preference for reaching more people rather than fewer people? Or that subjects are more readily feel that they themselves are at risk for a condition and are less able to visualize themselves as ever needing treatment for the condition?

12. Page 10, Paragraph 2: How did the participants “directly compare the operation to the quitting smoking course” if this was a between-subjects design in which participants were only shown one scenario?

13. Page 11, Paragraph 2: It would be useful to include the key quantitative results here, particularly the appreciation (primary outcome) scores.

14. Page 16, Paragraph 1: Were there statistically significant differences
between subjects in each study?

15. Page 19, Paragraph 1: The assertion that p = 0.08 “indicates a trend” should be removed.

Discretionary Revisions

16. All pages: Breaking the text up into separate paragraphs throughout would make the text much more digestible.

17. Page 9, Paragraph 2: A table or figure with a column for each scenario – that shows their commonalities and differences – would be useful.

18. Page 20, Paragraph 1: Again it seems that “comparative” seems to be a better adjective than “objective” here because it seems the key points relate to consideration of tradeoffs as opposed to an isolated appraisal.

19. Page 22, Paragraph 2: Would add the point that the relative influence of these factors (methods, efficacy, cost, etc.) could be disentangled in follow-up experiments.

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.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.