Reviewer's report

Title: Should the provision of home help services be contained? : Validation of the new preventive care programme in Japan

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Reviewer: Masafumi Kuzuya

Reviewer's report:

The authors address an important topic and study conducted in a country experiencing dramatic changes in population demographics and elder services. The many other countries stand to gain from the information gathered for the described study. Thus, the authors must insure a thorough exploration of their data and possible explanations for their findings. Limitations of this manuscript are insufficient detail about the statistical analysis, and inadequate discussion of how this work fits with previous research.

The paper shows less than a full understanding of the classic problem in use of statistical controls in evaluation research. The issue is adequacy of controls for need for services. In spite of use multivariate statistical techniques to control for need, there may be important unmeasured need that contributes to service use. Those who use formal service (day-care service) may have greater need than those who do not use formal services. The unmeasured needs that contribute to service use may be stronger than the positive effects of service. Consequently, use of services may be linked to undesired outcomes. Use of services may have positive effects but those effects may not be as powerful as the needs for which there are no adequate statistical controls.

In general the decline speed of physical function from the Level 1 (frail but not disabled) into Level 4 (ADL disability) seems to be too fast during average 18 months observation unless some events such as acute illness or hospitalization experience during follow-up periods. It's interesting and very important to consider and the authors should address these possibilities and/or control for them in their analyses.

The authors compared functional decline among subjects who use day-care service or home-help service. These results do not give the crucial information of the exact effect of service itself. To examine the exact effect of each service use on functional decline the analysis of total 834 subjects should be analyzed. Especially the comparison with subjects who did not use formal service despite being eligible for the lightest eligibility level may provide useful information.

Did the authors get information on the number of days of day-care used each week by clients? Did the authors analyze the relationship between ADL decline and number of days of day-care used per week?

In discussion authors described “providing more home help services did not lead
to greater decline in function.” However, the analysis has been conducted among subjects using day-care or home-help service. The results did not support the notion that home-help service use led to poor outcomes in terms of ADL status compared with nonuser of home-help service.

The authors tried to discuss the potential explanations of the ADL decline in day-care service use. However, although day-care programs may not improve functional decline of clients, how can the authors explain the fact that day-care service use accelerates the functional decline?

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.