Reviewer’s report

Title: International benchmarking of specialty hospitals. A series of case studies on comprehensive cancer centers.

Version: 2 Date: 3 December 2009

Reviewer: Klaske Wynia

Reviewer’s report:

This paper aimed on an important and interesting issue but needs compulsory revisions.

The aim of the study was (i) to present a process model for international benchmarking of operational performances by comprehensive cancer centres (or departments), and (ii) to give a description of success factors for international benchmarking in comprehensive cancer centres (page 8). Although the results are interesting this paper needs major revisions before it is possible to decide on acceptance or rejection. Therefore I will give suggestions for improvements in (mainly) the structure.

1 The introduction section needs more quality. Here I miss a coherent structure leading to a problem statement and research questions. For example, I miss a motivation for the growing interest in international benchmarking since 2000 as a consequence of the WHO report ‘Health systems: Improving Performance’. Moreover, the used references are outdated (1994 – 1995) and used to describe the actual situation (third paragraph reference 4). Finally, abbreviations should be spelled out (NHS and JCHO).

2 The literature study is interesting, especially the description of the results, but is not of the quality level one might expect from a systematic literature review. Therefore I suggest integrating the results, the problem statement and research questions of the literature review to the introduction section. Consequently the paragraphs concerning ‘methods for the literature review’ and tables 1, 3 and 5 can left out the manuscript.

3 For the quote ‘method for benchmarking’ (for example in research question 1 on page 8) I suggest to use ‘process model’ (consisting of several ‘process steps’) throughout the manuscript. The word ‘method’ can be misleading because each step in the process model needs specific methods.

The three case studies are focussing each on one ore more steps of the benchmarking process. I think that the description of these case studies could gain a lot of accessibility and clarity when they are presented as independent studies (instead of studies that ‘iteratively adjusted the method’ page 6) examining one or more steps in the process model. The same structure can be used in the results section where the findings concerning the success factors and – as I read from the results – necessary conditions for each step can be reported.
Furthermore, maybe these findings can be summarized in a table.

4 Furthermore I suggest transferring the paragraphs ‘Numerous benchmarking methods exist ….‘ (page 5 second part of the page) and ‘Van Hoorn and colleges‘ (page 5 last paragraph) (NB ref 20 should be ref 23, I think) and Figure 1 to the introduction paragraph and to give each step in the recommended method a number. For referring to the steps the numbers can be used.

NB. It perhaps seems strange to present a suggested model in the introduction section, but I can imagine that there are good arguments – also from literature – to found suggested new process steps.

5 Although the results found for the selected indicators in the case studies are interesting I wonder what the relevance is for the research questions. Of more importance are the findings concerning the success factors for each process step, the necessary conditions and maybe the results - in terms of operational performances - in the centres as a consequence of applying the benchmark process model.

6 As a consequence of the suggested revisions in the structure of the manuscript the discussion and conclusion sections will also need revision.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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