Reviewer's report

Title: Reorienting PBMA towards disinvestment

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Reviewer: Stuart James Peacock

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Reorienting PBMA towards disinvestment

Duncan Mortimer

Reviewer's comments

This is a well written and enjoyable paper to read. Developing systematic and transparent frameworks for disinvestment is arguably the most important contemporary topic in priority setting. Teams in Australia, Canada, the UK and elsewhere are devoting significant amounts of time to this issue. This paper represents a valuable contribution to the literature.

Minor essential revisions are below:

1. Page 3. “We argue that – if PBMA is to be of any assistance in facilitating disinvestment and resource release – four features of the process should be modified to reorient PBMA towards disinvestment.” This is an extremely strong statement, and one which I do not believe the author has backed up in the paper. I think the author is suggesting four features that might improve the way in which PBMA deals with disinvestments. I, and others, have been successful in getting disinvestments through PBMA without one or all of the four features presented here.

2. “Disinvestment via PBMA”. This paragraph seems somewhat confusing. The paper talks about re-orientating PBMA towards disinvestment. It seems to imply this is all PBMA should be doing. But this paragraph (I think quite rightly) says PBMA does not have to be solely about disinvestment. I think at the start of the paper you need to be explicit that PBMA can be about prioritizing investments, prioritizing investments and resource releases, and prioritizing investments, resource releases and disinvestments. The focus of this paper is not on the first of these three, and it is probably mainly on the last of these three. At present, a person not familiar with PBMA will read this and think PBMA has to be solely about disinvestments.

3. Page 4. I don’t think ‘marginal-value approaches’ has been defined – this is not a commonly use term and should be explained.

4. I am a little concerned that the section on budget constraints conflates two issues. I agree a hard and fast budget constraint may help focus the advisory panel on disinvestments. But, later in this section the author is talking about
budget cuts. This can be entirely different. It is possible, with a hard budget constraint and no change in the budget from last year, that decision-makers will not make any disinvestments and just keep on doing the same as last year (in fact this is extremely common). But, if they have a budget cut to absorb they must make disinvestments (presuming they cannot find savings from, say, firing a bunch of admin staff). I think the argument in this section is not as simple as is being presented. Disinvestments are more likely when the business cycle hits the bottom – this is related to the budget constraint, but it is not all about how hard or soft that constraint is.

5. ‘Scope’. I do not know how one would poach funds from someone else’s budget. I think this needs re-wording. The Canmore quote captures the reality – you cannot make recommendations about someone else’s budget because you cannot make decisions about their resources.

6. Page 9. ‘Expand empires’ is fine ‘feather nests’ could be inflammatory – to this reader it implies misappropriation of funds. Best to drop this second term.

7. Page 11. ‘It also seems clear that, if participants believe that additional funding can always be found from somewhere (such that the programme budget is not a true reflection of the resources available), there is a risk that PBMA will be treated as a mechanism by which programme managers can lobby for additional funds.’ In the sizeable number of studies me and my colleagues have been involved with this has never been the case. I think this is an unfair and unfounded criticism of PBMA – what really happens is the advisory panel goes through the process, some investments get funded, and some don’t. Some decision-makers, through their own ‘managerial guile’, are able to source out additional funds from other sources. Similarly, some disinvestments are funded from elsewhere due to decision-makers finding extra funds. PBMA is not the vehicle for lobbying for the extra funds. It is the decision-makers who make this happen. Further, those decision-makers typically try to bury the PBMA evidence in these cases – precisely because PBMA does not support their agenda!

I have several comments which can be considered as discretionary revisions only. I hope the author finds them useful and worthwhile considering in a revised manuscript.

1. The author is quite right to say there have been successes and failures when it comes to obtaining disinvestments and resource releases in PBMA. But, the paper would benefit from a paragraph that explains that PBMA is arguably the only economic framework that begins to address disinvestments explicitly. Many other frameworks simply ignore the issue and presume we can keep on investing ad infinitum. Cost-effectiveness analysis as practiced by NICE and the PBAC are prime examples of frameworks that simply do not address disinvestments in any kind of systematic way. PHARMAC does a better job, as does the general ‘core services’ approach which is being resurrected in NZ. More context on the lack of attention given to disinvestments in general would help, then some recognition that PBMA has actually tried to do what others have simply overlooked.
2. I am not especially comfortable with the term ‘hit list’. My experience has been that health professionals and politicians will often reject approaches which use terms like “cuts”, “cut-backs”, “rationing”, etc. To my mind ‘hit list’ will get push back. Not nearly as catchy is a term like ‘resource release’ but to my mind, the lack of catchiness can be helpful (though there will be other terms that could be used too).

3. I am a little concerned that the notion that there is, or will be a hard budget constraint. In some cases this will be true – especially given the fiscal realities faced by many countries – but this will be far from true in many cases. Decision-makers are very skilled in finding alternative pots of money to fund things from. In almost all priority setting exercises decision-makers circumvent one or two difficult disinvestment options by going outside the current budget envelope for additional funds. The paper could spend more time on the issue of ‘how realistic is it to assume that decision-makers won’t search out alternative sources of funding?’

4. I do not think the section header “Discussion” should be used here. It can be omitted. The reader will know this is an essay/opinion piece.

5. Page 11. “In particular, fund-holders should make clear to participants that there will be no ad hoc funding for high priority service expansions that cannot be funded out of the programme budget.” How? Take Australia as the example. There are something like 60 different funding programs/agencies, some at the State level, and some at the Commonwealth level. There is no single fund-holder, and even if you could identify all of the potential fund-holders in all instances, how would you enforce this?

6. I think the paper might benefit from including a recent related reference: How to control the costs of health care services - An inventory of strategic options by Francois Dionne, Craig Mitton, Jean Shoveller, Stuart Peacock, and Morris Barer. It came out in Healthcare Management Forum in 2009 and has some material that is relevant for this paper.

**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'