Reviewer's report

Title: The role of advisory committees for large studies: an observational study

Version: 1 Date: 30 September 2010

Reviewer: Philippe Duclos

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Major compulsory revisions

The title is misleading. Although it is literally truthful to what was done, I must say that for me observational study gives a connotation of looking at more than one case and a much more elaborate undertaking. Hence I would request that the title be changed to read a case study instead of an observational study.

Need to clarify the purpose of the advisory committees i.e. for design, ethical issues, management of study…

Abstract

Why were the recommendations received after the first seven months not recorded?

Unclear how the benefits were assessed.

The results in the abstract do not relate directly to the background i.e. background talks about optimal composition, scope and contribution and the results does not allude to optimal composition nor scope.

"Implications" or rather "recommendations"?

Last sentence, unclear what the three identified criteria for decision making are?

Methods

The methods design should make it clear that this is observational design but based on one and only case study. Also please clarify experts as experts and or health services users and carers.

In the procedure it would seem important to me to indicate if the committees.

Perhaps worth commenting that the PI was chairing two of the groups i.e. IAB and the steering committee and how appropriate or problematic that is.

In paragraph before last of procedure section under methods, it should be clarified how many specific experts were consulted that were members or non-members of advisory committees. Should also be specified the frequency of meetings for the three groups after November 2009.
Results
Would be useful to know how many recommendations were made by individual members and non members.

In the results it is said that there were two benefits from the advice. First an overall research quality improvement How can we objectively know about this? The second point is about credibility. The costs identified do not seem to include the true costs of running the various committees including cost of travel if any…

It would be good to try to make sense and better interpret the differential acceptance of recommendations form the various groups and individuals. I am also chocked with the undecided category. Seems to me like either you accept and implement or reject a recommendation. Undecided means a serious flaw or problem in the management. Could this be explained better? If I go by the rejection rate (not implemented), however, it seems that the individual experts are doing better than the committees??

Discussion
The first sentence of the second paragraph of the discussion is for me a leap of faith.

The last paragraph on page 10 says that this is the first study to evaluate. In view of how light the evaluation is, I would tend to me a bit more modest and talk about monitoring or attempt to evaluate.

There are no comments on the composition and structure of the committees.

Both "Limitations and future research" and "Public involvement" should be part of the discussion.

Table 1 specifies that there were recommendations about the role and composition of the committee. Perhaps this could be explained and bring more insight in the discussion.

The break down in the sub themes under scientific recommendations looks a bit arbitrary to me with overlapping categories

I wonder about the usefulness of table 2. Certainly the issuance of recommendations on a monthly basis is correlated with when the committees meetings were held. It might be more useful if presented by committee type as well.

Minor essential revisions.

Please add country code to phone contacts.

Add "about" or "related to" after "Most recommendations were" in the abstract.

At top of page 5 one refers to health services users and carers and yet these are
called experts on page 2 in the abstracts. Please adjust wording.
In the first sentence of procedure, change Initial advice for Initial advisory
Discretionary revisions
Background
Second paragraph would be useful to indicate the month when the study was awarded.
Is the sentence before last of the second paragraph really needed
Am not too keen on the use of manualised. This may be the very wording to use from the specialist's perspective but for those other readers some other wording may be more appropriate.

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

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 with my reviewing the manuscript "The role of advisory committees for large studies: an observational study"