Reviewer’s report

Title: The importance of primary care as a multidimensional concept: a systematic literature review.

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Reviewer: Fraser Macfarlane

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This research paper aims to identify essential dimensions of primary care systems and examine the existing evidence for their relevance in relation to improvement of (primary) health care systems. It looks at 85 studies published in English language journals reporting original research or systematic reviews. The search was for articles published between 2003 and July 2008.

Overall given the importance of primary care in the delivery of health services and the paucity of reviews, this is a timely and relevant piece of work. The search strategy is clear and the inclusion/exclusion criteria look entirely appropriate. The paper contains a clear and helpful summary of all papers included in the review.

Major compulsory revisions

(i) It is not clear why studies published before 2003 were not included. The authors need to justify this.

(ii) The authors also state that Starfield’s work (because it is based on highly industrialised countries like the US) cannot automatically be translated to the European situation. There may be many reasons why Starfield’s work cannot be translated to other situations, but I cannot see the relevance of industrialisation. Besides, Starfield’s ‘definition’ of primary care: access, continuity, co-ordination, comprehensiveness and context orientation would appear to fit both the US and European setting, as well as many in developing countries. The authors need to explain its lack of suitability.

(iii) I am also quite confused by the apparent inter-change of the words aspects, concepts and dimensions. I would like the authors to be consistent and where possible use one word, which they adequately define in the introduction to the paper. The paper defines a dimension as a major subject area consisting of several primary care system features. However, it is not clear what a primary care feature is. The paper then lists a series of ten (of Starfield’s) features.

(iv) There is no evidence that the second part of the paper’s aim was achieved, namely examining the evidence for [the dimensions’] relevance in relation to the improvement of (primary) health care systems. This should be added to the analysis or, otherwise, the paper’s aims and objectives should be modified accordingly.

(v) I was interested to look at the use of Donabedian’s (structure, process and
outcome) approach to structuring the dimensions of a primary health care system. I am familiar with its use in defining and analysing quality but the authors need to justify its use in identifying the dimensions of primary care which lead to health care development. Surely Starfield’s features would be more appropriate. The authors then list ten dimensions against which they analyse each paper (for example governance, economic conditions, workforce development). I am not clear where these dimensions come from nor am I certain that they have been classified in the correct way. For example, workforce development has been grouped under ‘structure’, surely this is a process? Much more justification is needed for this analytical framework given its centrality to the paper.

Each dimension is then further ‘broken down’ – for example governance: health care goals, policy on access, decentralisation of management, quality management infrastructure, appropriate technology, patient advocacy, ownership status of primary care, and integration of primary care in the health care setting. Of this list I would say that only three (decentralisation of management, management infrastructure and ownership) would count as governance issues. Again the authors need to justify the framework that has been adopted.

There is no doubt that primary care is a multidimensional system and that the dimensions presented are important. However, I have major concerns about the validity of using such a framework to analyse the data. Before this paper is published the authors need to justify its use. As it stands, I would recommend that major revisions need to be undertaken before the paper is accepted.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**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.