Reviewer's report

Title: Primary medical care in Irish prisons

Version: 1 Date: 7 November 2009

Reviewer: Christopher Chong

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The authors provide an important and valuable description of prison clinics. I suggest the following revisions may improve the transparency of the methods and results:

1. (minor revision) The authors reasonably indicate that three prisons "...were excluded from the study due to funding reasons." How did the authors choose which 3 prisons to exclude? Was it random?

2. (discretionary revision) I would like to know details on how the Appendix A questionnaire was developed. How was it decided that those specific questions would be asked covering those specific domains? Details on the survey's development would allow the readers to better judge its validity. This comment is especially relevant for the presented results that are based solely on the survey responses, if any.

3. (discretionary revision) I personally would like to see a table outlining the overall sociodemographic characteristics of the prisons (gender, age, average duration of incarceration, etc). To be even more rigorous, a comparison could also be drawn between the included and excluded prisons.

4. (major revision) For Table 1, it is very unclear to me exactly how the facilities were deemed either suitable or unsuitable. What criteria was this based on? Global judgment by the inspector? Based on the results of the Appendix B questionnaire? The method used needs to be more explicit to assess the reproducibility and validity of this finding. Also, the two columns "medical facilities description" and "suitability of facilities" duplicate the same finding.

5. (discretionary revision) For Table 2, why of the many survey items listed in Appendix B did the authors choose to only present those 6? This seems somewhat arbitrary. One could also consider completing some Chi-square tests to see where the differences between prisons and community are significant.

6. (minor revision) For the lay reader, I think it would be useful to describe what a prison physician is actually doing on "committals and transfers" in Ireland.

7. (minor revision) The two sentences in the Discussion "There are at present seven full time doctors contracted for 39 hours per week...In addition, there are 16 part time doctors..." belongs in the Results section.

8. (minor revision) Regarding the section in the Discussion "Suppot Staff" I feel
that there is some mixing up of Results vs. Discussion. For example, isn't the description of what nurses do a Result, based on the Appendix A survey? Isn't a description of what medical orderlies do a Result? Otherwise, where is the reference that supports the statement that "Their current role includes providing security surveillance, night cover, and response to emergency situation such as stabbings, cutting and cardiac arrest?" The section reads a bit too much like the authors' anecdotal knowledge (which may very well be true).

9. (major revision) I feel very strongly that there must be a section outlining the study's limitations. There are some significant ones that, while I don't believe should preclude publication, do need to be clearly acknowledged. The major limitations that I see are (a) use of a single inspector; (b) use of a "Doctor's Questionnaire" to estimate hours/week and medical staffing rather than say actual employment records.

10. (minor revision) For Table 3, could the authors more explicitly define what they mean by "whole time equivalent" and how that was calculated?

11. (discretionary revision) The surveys seem to include a large amount of information that the authors chose not to present, but I think is quite interesting. For example, the length of a typical session with a physician, feeling of security, screening for hepatitis B/C.

**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.