Reviewer's report

Title: The Complexity of Assessing Differences between Public and Private Hospitals: Some Evidence from China

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Reviewer: Beverley Copnell

Reviewer's report:

General comments:
This study compares several aspects of performance of public and private hospitals in one area of China. The purpose of the comparison is, however, unclear. The title suggests it is to illustrate complexity in conducting such comparisons but complexity is not referred to after the introduction. No aim is clearly stated in either the abstract or the text. There are some implications that the aim is to compare quality of care delivered by the three types of hospital; if so it is difficult to see how this study differs from those critiqued in the introduction. The manuscript is hard to follow, particularly as the structure differs from the usual format for a research paper. In addition, it is difficult to put it in context without an understanding of China's health care system; I doubt many readers would have this degree of familiarity.

Specific comments:
Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The manuscript should be restructured in the accepted format for a research paper, ie introduction, aim, methods, results, discussion, conclusion. There is no need to summarise the results in the introduction. The limitations should be addressed in the discussion, not the methods.

2. The aim should be clearly stated in both the abstract and the main text.

3. The literature review could be shortened considerably.

4. Some background on the functioning of both public and private hospitals would help in establishing the context of the study. It is particularly important to know whether ownership is the only difference in the overall management (for instance, it can be inferred from the tables that doctors are salaried employees of all types of hospital; this is not the norm in private hospitals in some countries), and how hospitals are governed or regulated. Also in relation to this point, the number of nurses employed by all hospitals is extremely small (Table 1); are these numbers correct? Are nurses the only staff providing hands-on care or are assistant personnel employed?

5. More detail on the methods is required. In particular, what is 'hospital survey data', who collects it, is reporting mandatory, does it consist only of the data
reported here? Are other quality metrics reported to any other external body?

6. Tables 2-4 need to be referenced in the text.

7. What is the significance of hospitals not being classified? Does this mean they have not sought accreditation or have failed to meet a standard?

8. Page 8 para 2: where is the data on equipment and patient mix?

9. Page 8 para 3: this section seems more like interpretation than results.

10. The section ‘quality results’ is not clear. It states that quality will be compared using ‘structural metrics and some patient outcomes’ but the only measure reported under this heading is hospital mortality. Why were the other outcomes measures not included? Are the structural metrics only those already discussed? Moreover, I question the inclusion of unadjusted mortality as a quality measure, albeit with (some) acknowledgement of its limitations. The final paragraph of this section is also unclear; was this analysis done as part of the study or is it a comment?

Minor Essential Revisions

11. The tables are very difficult to follow. It is not clear what the data represent (ie, %, median, mean, n?). If citing a measure of central tendency it would be useful to include a measure of dispersion as well (range, IQR, SD, as appropriate). What rates are used for mortality in Table 5 (per 100000 admissions?)

12. The referencing format is inconsistent and there are some typographical errors in the citations.

**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