Reviewer's report

Title: 'Reaching the Hard to Reach' - Lessons learned from the VCS (Voluntary and Community Sector)

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Reviewer: Sue Thompson

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As the authors point out, this is an area of great importance to health and social service practitioners and to researchers. Increasing current understanding of the issues involved from the perspectives of both service and client is vital to future service provision that is both appropriate and successful. Reaching the more 'hidden' potential clients/patients of any service is fraught with difficulty and an approach to specialist voluntary organisations with contact and experience in some of these areas is certainly a reasonable to go about investigating some of the issues involved.

It is unclear whether the authors intention is to use their research to focus on the implications for primary care, or whether they wish to examine the question of reaching 'hard-to-reach' clients/patients in the broader sense. If the latter is the case, then unfortunately this paper hardly covers such a large area very well, and if the former this point is never made. If it is assumed that the authors' main focus is to shed light on potential issues around reaching hard-to-reach patients in primary health care, it is unclear whether they have evidence that it is the specific groups they have chosen to focus upon that, according to the general literature they mention, are also hard-to-reach in primary care. They need to make this connection if it is their intention, and to explain any particular factors which may affect primary care and hard-to-reach sections of the primary care population. Their methods therefore, while well-intentioned, cannot be said to be reliably established.

The literature review, such as it is, appears partial and highly dated: all the material cited is, apart from one 2006 publication, at least 4 years old and this is a serious drawback to the paper. There is a considerable fund of literature already in existence in this area, but the authors appear to have failed to locate or ignored much of it, and perhaps have failed to update a literature search carried out some time ago. In addition, they retain a very traditional approach in their definition of 'hard-to-reach' and fail to acknowledge the view that a useful definition of 'hard-to-reach' should go beyond the more traditional categories mentioned in the Background section and include those isolated and socially excluded for other reasons, including members of 'rare' populations, people with stigmatising conditions, those involved in other illegal practices, those refusing to identify with the categories assigned to them by the health services, etc.

The discussion on the research findings displays a useful set of issues about
possible reasons why some potential contacts may prove ‘hard-to-reach’, but there is a feeling that such interviews could have offered a chance to probe more deeply into some of the factors which characterise the groups in questions, and it was frustrating to read a list of ‘barriers’ and ‘facilitators’ which remained at quite a basic level with a discussion which failed to develop some of these issues and offer more understanding.

It was disappointing that the concluding section failed to draw together the interview data and use them to examine any significance for practice, and in particular for primary care (if this was indeed the authors’ main aim). There was no mention of any implications for future policy which could be drawn from the findings presented. While recognising the authors’ description of their fieldwork as a pilot for a more extensive project, one suspects that, had the response of the voluntary organisations been more enthusiastic and the respondent group larger and more diverse, the data would have offered rather better conclusions than is reported in the paper.

Overall, the paper, and the project it describes, appear lacking in width and in detail, given the scope and complexity of the area they have chosen to study. To merit publication it would be essential to re-address the literature section and to substantially increase the scope of the references and ensure that it is more up-to-date. In addition, the aims of the paper and the research on which it is based could be more carefully and succinctly described, and a clearer focus established. This would in turn allow the authors to relate their findings to a more specific area and to offer some useful conclusions, which should include some discussion on the implications of their findings.

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