Reviewer's report

Title: Regulatory barriers to equity in a diversified health system: a qualitative study in Bulgaria

Version: 1 Date: 22 June 2011

Reviewer: Hans Maarse

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Review regulatory barriers to equity in a diversified health system: a qualitative study.

This is a well-written article on some experiences in Bulgaria with the consequences of health care reform. It is a qualitative study, based upon 50 interviews with various kinds of people involved in health care and with a focus on disadvantaged children and the Roma community.

It is an interesting article that gives much inside-information on how the Bulgarian health system 'really works'. However, in my opinion, the article does not contain much news to readers who are (reasonably) well-informed about this system. It is primarily of interest to readers who are not (very) familiar with the system.

An unanswered question is to what extent the results can be regarded as representative for the Bulgarian system. To my knowledge, however, it gives a fair overview.

I have a few problems with the analytical framework of regulatory barriers. My points are:

* The role of the classification of regulatory instruments (table 1) is not clear to me. What is done with it?

* I do not know whether all problems discussed are caused by regular barriers. I would argue that in some cases, it seems that regulations are not the real problem, but the way they are complied with in the 'real world' and the way they are perceived by the participants. There seems to be a huge gap between two worlds: the world of regulations and the world of daily practice. In other cases regulations do constitute a problem, because they are not well designed or are based upon non-realistic assumptions (e.g. the overnight introduction of a GP system). More generally, I would say that policymaking remains a fundamental problem in Bulgaria, because the stakeholders and population is not or only hardly involved in it. It is classical management by decree as also happened in the old communist times.

* The analysis is somewhat static. Is there any reason to believe that the situation in health care is improving or deteriorating?
Guidelines:

1. Question well defined. YES
2. methods appropriate: REASONABLY
3. Data sound: YES

Minor revisions required