Reviewer’s report

Title: Can vouchers encourage the use of private primary care services? Evidence from Hong Kong with a tax-based financing system

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Reviewer: Timo Seppälä

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Major Compulsory Revisions

1) Background is too shallow. The vouchers in general are not described and connected together with existing literature adequately in the introduction. E.g. describing different reason to establish voucher schemas would make a great improvement, namely, there are different reasons in different countries and continents to establish vouchers.

2) Better motivation for the study is needed and can be done by revising the introduction to expose the meaning and reasoning of the study right in the beginning of the background section. Now, the motivation and what the study is about is the last paragraph of the background section.

3) The mechanism of the vouchers, why they should be effective, how those affect the behavior and what challenges those make for demand and supply side should be at least shortly discussed.

4) I’m not sure whether it is a misspelling or misunderstanding but generally there is a difference between provider and producer, in the text those are used as synonyms which is partially confusing. If the system is tax-based I guess the provider of the services is the state while the producer is private or public health center.

5) All monetary values should be expressed in Dollars or Euros to make comparisons easier and facilitate international dimension of the article. Also, it should be exposed directly in the beginning what is approximate income level of Chinese relevant to the study. By this, the magnitude of the voucher program would be clearer to the reader.

6) On page 6, important objective of the study has been exposed; evaluation of vouchers' potential impact on primary health care system. However, the study does not really respond currently to this objective. I would suggest putting a lot effort on correcting and improving this part of the study as it constitutes a very important and interesting part.

7) The reasoning behind selection of the groups for the survey is not clear and needs to be clarified to make a point for selecting two different groups.

8) The tested and tools to test difference between perceived and actual behavior is not absolutely clear. Why some people would say that he or she doesn’t think there has been a change in his or her behavior but then actually there has been
9) It is not clear what was actually tested in statistical analyses. Were the tests within perceived/actual behavior for different groups or between perceived and actual behavior? Unfortunately, not even the tables do clarify the matter, and in fact, also those need to be described better.

10) Selection of controls and explanatory variables is unclear. Why e.g. schooling appears in analyses as an explanatory variable and not as a control? The same question applies to all selected variables. Hence, some solid reasoning is needed to support the made choices.

11) Study question is exposed in a way that supports quantitative analysis, however, the analysis and reasoning for the results in merely based on qualitative analysis. It should be made clear for the reader that the level of analyses will be qualitative and some light quantitative methods will be used to trace possible factors behind qualitative findings.

12) The dependent variables are not well exposed.

13) The reader is craving for the main finding. What is novel or surprising solid finding and contribution of the study?

14) Why one should use a voucher when he or she is not in need of services?

15) Inferences in the discussion section are not obvious from the analyses, and thus analyses should be explained more and subtle.

16) In the discussion part, cost-effectiveness and incentives are discussed but the study is lacking of the analyses supporting the discussion, and hence needs to be revised to correct the point. Why voucher-based system would be more cost-effective? Why it should have incentivizing elements? These questions need to be addressed with solid answers before entering the discussion.

17) Reporting subsidy level too low should not lead to inference about inability to pay since the reason can be also low willingness to pay, or biased answer for which there is vast behavioural economics literature. To make the inference, deeper analysis needs to be conducted.

18) Matters about representativeness should be exposed right in the beginning of data description and not at the end of the discussion section.

Minor Essential Revisions

19) It is not standard way to start statistical analysis by exposing the primary outcome of the study. I suppose this part is rather due to the language but needs concentration to make it sound.

20) The table for descriptive statistics would be easier to read than percentages in the text. There is no need to expose the descriptive statistics in the text when there is a good and clear table but concentration in text should be on remarkable differences or findings from the descriptive statistics. When there’s none then it is enough to show the table.

21) Multiple logistic regression should probably be multivariate logistic regression.
22) What would be a mechanism to make private prices more comparable with public ones?

Discretionary Revisions

23) It might be useful to use literature also from non-healthcare sector when comparing the effects of voucher based systems. E.g. from schooling or other sectors there exists vast literature on vouchers.

24) To get more insight how the vouchers might and might not affect behavior authors should use vast literature from behavioural economics.

25) To get a lot insight to the results one should explore private producer sector more deeply. What are the reasons behind possible inactivity of producer sector?

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

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