Reviewer's report

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

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 4 May 2011

**Reviewer:** Simo Kokko

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General comments on the article

The article is – as such – well written and it reports a study that is adequately designed, but the main question and problem is in the fundamental objective of the study and of the whole “voucher system”. The manuscript states that the objective of the study was to assess the acceptability of vouchers to the older people. A more realistic formulation of the objective could be to ask whether the health care usage behaviour of older people would be changed by introduction of a voucher system what would cover (only) a small fraction of the total costs.

Then to the specific questions as advised,

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

In short, the study and the article are well-designed, but the I am afraid that the title and the text keep asking the wrong question, when they assess the acceptance and use of vouchers. The right question would be to ask whether a relatively small subsidy (of about 25-35 % of the costs per encounter according to my calculations) can make a difference in the patterns of how older people use health services. How the subsidy is channelled – through a voucher or for example through direct transfers – would be of lesser interest.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

The methods, the overall setting and the sample are appropriate and adequately described given the existing restrictions of not having population registers or other routes to approach older people. I would assume that the general finding of there having been not much change would not have been different if the sampling would have been in more proportionate match with the actual target population.

3. Are the data sound?

See my comments to question # 2 above. The data seem to be acceptable.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

Yes it does.
5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

The problem with the manuscript is in its failure to grasp (both describe and discuss) the larger picture questions of how the health services operate in Hong Kong and especially how older people behave in their use of health services.

For example, the introduction states that the vouchers were aimed at promoting use of preventive services and longer term outpatient care for chronic illnesses. No explanation is given why the system did not channel or limit the use of vouchers for these purposes only. Similarly, the text states that older people have the habit of “doctor shopping”. This would be something that a health system should try to avoid especially in the care of long term illnesses. Why were there no special incentives built into the system to encourage or incentivize continuity of care?

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

The work on the empirical data proceeds in a professional and cautious way, but the limitations that I would find important, are in the general setting.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

The authors may refer to vouchers or voucher systems that are not necessarily similar to the system in place in Hong Kong. I have not had a change to go through the whole field of relevant the literature. However, the first notion of a voucher would be that the voucher covers the total cost or the total cost deducted with a normal user fee or deductible. The voucher system in Hong Kong in this case, channels a relatively small subsidy. Such a subsidy may easily lead into the subsidy funds raising the actual charges, if not managed and monitored properly. At least, I would expect that the authors should acknowledge this aspect and difference in what kinds of vouchers are used.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

The same general problem that I have been pointing here is present also in the abstract.

9. Is the writing acceptable?

As a minimum requirement, I would expect the authors to include both background information and also essential elements into the discussion of the points that are addressed in my comments to question #5.