Reviewer's report

Title: How do small rural primary health care services sustain themselves in a constantly changing health system environment?

Version: 2 Date: 15 November 2011

Reviewer: Bernd Rechel

Reviewer's report:

I enjoyed reading this manuscript and believe that it is potentially publishable in BMC Health Services Research, but also felt that it has some way to go to become a coherent piece of work. In particular, I found that the title, the abstract and the rest of the manuscript are not convincingly tied together and do not provide the level of details needed to understand the conclusions the authors draw. Please see below my suggested revisions.

1) The title refers to “a constantly changing health system environment”. However, the rest of the manuscript provides very little details about the changes to which the primary health services had to respond, so that it is virtually impossible to judge whether the factors identified by the authors are crucial or not. Table 1 talks more appropriately about “threats”. I would therefore suggest to change the title into something like “How can small rural primary health services react to threats and opportunities?” More details on both (threats and opportunities) would then be useful!

2) The abstract maintains that the Elmore Primary Health Service has ensured “ongoing viability”. I wonder whether this is not too early to judge after only 4 years of implementation? The authors should exercise a bit more caution in drawing conclusions on success or failure. I also found the 6-year longitudinal evaluation mentioned in the abstract to be misleading, as the manuscript only draws on the first 4 years. Finally, “change” (in the first sentence of the abstract) is a very broad and abstract category. Do the authors really consider primarily “change”, or do they look at threats and opportunities?

3) Regarding the manuscript itself, it is not only about change per se. The factors mentioned in the beginning of para 3 on p. 3 apply to primary health services in rural areas in general and are not related to “change”.

4) More details on the changing context (or rather the threats and opportunities) would be very useful. Examples are the changes in the rural classification system (mentioned, but not elaborated on on p. 3) and the public-private financing model (p. 6).

5) What is a “systems approach” (p. 4)

6) Why do the authors believe that Elmore has a successful PHC service (p. 5 and p. 7)? More details on this would help to substantiate the conclusions the
authors draw.

7) How can 2760 patients attend the service at least once during the year (p. 5), if Elmore has a population of only 700 (p. 4)?

8) “how long will this success last?” – this question is not answered in the text.

9) Lessons (p. 8-11) – I would prefer to have those integrated into the Discussion/Results.

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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