Reviewer's report

Title: Factors associated with reported service use for mental health problems by residents of rural and remote communities: cross-sectional findings from a baseline survey

Version: 1 Date: 29 March 2013

Reviewer: Craig Anne Heflinger

Reviewer's report:

This manuscript examines the patterns of self-reported mental health problems and service use by rural and remote residents in New South Wales, Australia. An existing database (The Australian Rural Mental Health Study) was used to provide descriptive characteristics of mental health need and service use and to compare the findings to those previously published for an urban Australian population.

The manuscript is well organized and written, has a logical and appropriate literature review, and used appropriate measures and statistical techniques to answer the questions posed. It appears to make a substantive contribution to the literature on Australian health service delivery as well as serving as an example for methods that could be used elsewhere with rural populations.

To answer the journal's general questions:
1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined? Yes
2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? Yes
3. Are the data sound? Yes
4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? Yes
5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? Yes
6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? Yes
7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? Yes
8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? Yes
9. Is the writing acceptable? Yes

Major compulsory revisions: None

Minor essential revisions:
1. The reader needs a succinct description of the NSW mental health services “system” - unless this journal’s readership is exclusively in NSW among those who are familiar with the delivery of mental health services.
a. In the text it mentions that psychologists and psychiatrists (P&P) are not necessarily part of the public health system. What does this imply regarding service access?

b. Do Primary Care Providers refer to P&P?

c. How are services paid for when delivered by P&P?

d. And what is the availability of P&P, particularly when compared to urban areas so that the comparisons on service use are made. The authors need to generate the number and rate per 1000 of P&P in rural, remote, and urban NSW so that the reader can understand if the comparisons are reasonable.

e. There is a similar question regarding specialty substance abuse services but the authors refer to another article for the details on that issue.

f. Related, the text says “most rural and remote residents have access to primary health care and GP whether resident or visiting” (p. 15) – there needs to be a citation to a resource for more information on this issue if not included here in the manuscript.

2. The role of stigma is accessing specialty mental health care is not mentioned (2nd paragraph p. 16). In fact, community-level factors are not included. Despite excellent documentation and citation of related research regarding mental health need and service use, this important paragraph does not contain a single reference to the existing literature in this area.

3. What are the policy implications of these findings? What are the practice implications? This is an excellent descriptive study but needs translation to the “so what” and “now what” questions. Might these include the need for a rigorous ethnographic study to better understand the context or rural/remote service need/access and the factors influencing service use or non-use?

Discretionary revisions:

Please clarify the relationship of the urban data to which comparisons are made. Was this a related survey using exactly the same measures?

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

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests