Reviewer's report

Title: Development of an integrated system for classification, assessment and comparison of services for Long-Term Care in Europe: The eDESDE-LTC Study

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Reviewer: Jürgen Stausberg

Reviewer's report:

Salvador-Carulla et al. present in their article “Development of an integrated system for classification, assessment and comparison of services for Long-Term Care in Europe: The eDESDE-LTC Study” an evaluation of a system describing services for long-term care. As the reviewer understands it, DESDE-LTC is a multi-axial system having several hierarchical axes. A service for long term care could then be described by combining several descriptors from different axes. An institution providing several services uses several of those combinations.

The attempt is challenging, because such a system is missing not only for long term care but also for hospital care or medical outpatient care. One might question whether it is really needed from a practical point of view. Nevertheless, the attempt is still scientifically interesting, at least useful for health services research.

Major Compulsory Revisions

a) First of all, the title is misleading. As it is pointed out by the authors themselves, the system had been introduced elsewhere. The current manuscript focuses on the evaluation. Therefore, I recommend changing the title as follows: “Evaluation of an integrated system for classification, assessment and comparison of services for Long-Term Care in Europe: The eDESDE-LTC Study”.

b) Secondly, there is a gap between the presentation of DESDE-LTC in the manuscript and what could be read in the manuals provided at the project’s homepage. The manuals state that “DESDE-LTC ... is an adaptation of the coding system of the ESMS ... and (DESDE) and related instruments (DESDAE and DESDE).” That definition is different to the one mentioned in the abstract: “The development of the DESDE-LTC coding system followed an iterative process using nominal groups in the 6 participating countries (Spain, Austria, Bulgaria, Norway, Slovenia and the UK).” It should be clarified, that DESDE-LTC is significantly grounded on existing approaches that themselves offer a very specific scope.

c) Thirdly, the structure of the manuscript should be revised:

c1) Background: Information is missing between the two last paragraphs.

c2) Methods: The description of the development process of DESDE-LTC should be part of the introduction. The method’s section should concentrate on the
methods used for evaluation. The evaluation follows a structured process. The development process itself remains unclear to some extent.

c3) Result and discussion: There should be separate chapters for results and discussion.

c4) Result and discussion: The “Development of the eDESDE-LTC system” is not part of the evaluation. These paragraphs should be integrated in the introduction.

c5) Result and discussion: Sentences like “The DESDE-LTC tool may have a significant impact in efficiency and aspects of equity assessment in the near future” represent conclusions, not results.

c6) Result and discussion: The last paragraph of section “Development of the eDESDE-LTC system” should be moved to section conclusions as well.

c7) Result and discussion: Subheading “Usability of the eDESDE-LTC instrument: Feasibility, Consistency, Reliability and Validity” should be deleted. The following four subsubheadings should be subheadings.

c8) Result and discussion: Section “The DESDE-LTC training package” could be deleted. It does not contribute to the evaluation.

c9) Limitations: I suggest moving the limitations as a subsection into the chapter discussion.

d) The authors point to the material available at their website. The description of the classification and coding system raises severe concerns regarding the methodological foundation of DESDE-LTC. Due to the manifold concerns, the conclusion of the authors that “This instrument is ontology consistent and semantically interoperable” must be rejected. In the following I list some concerns in detail.

d1) Non mobile outpatient care is available in figure 1 but not present in the manual.

d2) The role of the decimal_identifier remains unclear. It is unclear what is mentioned with code in the manuscript.

d3) Labels are missing for some descriptors.

d4) Axes S does not cover the domain completely, because a class “other” is missing.

d5) The descriptors use abbreviations inconsistently, for example “Med. intens.”

d6) Different characteristics are used for the definition of classes on the same level. That establishes a logically difficult construct, e.g. there is something like “Home & mobile” which is contrasted with “non-mobile”. If mobility is the relevant characteristic, “Home” is not needed. If not, there must be something like “Home & non-mobile”, “Not home & mobile”, and “Not home & not-mobile”.

d7) A coding of intermediate levels is permitted. How to deal with levels that do not have a label? How is it possible to make analysis on the terminal level if some information is available solely on an intermediate level?

d8) The decimal_identifiers could be optionally extended by characters representing additional information. This is a bad solution impeding an automatic
processing of the codes. Additional information should be represented through additional items.

d) Why is “other intensity” the contrast of “high intensity” in D0 and D1, but “low intensity” in all other parts of day care.

Beyond the major concerns there are several minor essential revisions needed.

e) “Local evidence (from the specific setting” should be “Local evidence from the specific setting”.

f) “settings, need” should be “settings, needs”.

g) Please describe the methods used in the preparation of the beta version of DESDE-LTC.

h) “sufficiently. Finally” should be “sufficiently. Finally”.

i) In the section about the development of DESDE-LTC, an “original instrument” is mentioned. Please name the instrument.

j) Feasibility analysis: Provide reference values for the figures if possible.

k) Impact analysis: Organize the result’s section about the impact analysis according to the introduced steps screening, scoping, appraisal.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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.