Author’s response to reviews

Title: Important challenges for coordination and inter-municipal cooperation in health care services: A Delphi study

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Author’s response to reviews:

Dear Editor,

On behalf of our research group, I am pleased to resubmit the manuscript entitled “Important challenges for coordination and inter-municipal cooperation in health care services: A Delphi study” by Elisabeth Holen-Rabbersvik, Tom Roar Eikebrokk, Rune Fensli, Elin Thygesen and Åshild Slettebø to be considered for publication in BMC Health Services Research.

We appreciate the useful and accurate comments, suggestions and requests from the reviewers that have allowed us to further improve our work. We have carefully considered and answered the items. We look forward to your comments on the revised version of our manuscript.

Reviewer report (Sarah McIntyre)

Methods

Q1: There is a very small n value used in this paper. Although the authors give great detail in text and figure 1 about how the participants were identified from the 31 emails passed on, there is no mention as to why the other 400 were not invited in the first place. With over 400 municipalities and only 19 participating (5%), can the authors at least describe the process of sending the first email to only 79?

A: Thank you for this advice. We agree that this information was not clearly presented in the original text and have revised this section. As this study is a qualitative study, the goal was not to include all the municipalities in order to be able to generalize. The idea was originally to compare the views in large and small municipalities during the rounds of the study. As you can see in figure one, we started up with request to 25 large municipalities and 24 small municipalities. Based on the quantity of responses, we pragmatically invited more participants.
In the end we had 19 participants and based on literature on participation in Delphi-studies and consensus processes, we chose to set these 19 as the cut off for recruitment. However, this number was not large enough to divide the group based on the size of the municipality, but we get variability in answers from the large and small municipalities.

Q2: Should this also be in the limitations?
A: Yes, the lack of medium size municipalities is now included in the limitations.

Q3: I have not read a Delphi methodology like this before, I suggest they use the terminology modified-Delphi. There are three different “consensus” methods used in different rounds. I have not seen this before, however it seemed to be appropriate for the author’s needs.
A: We have noticed that the term “modified Delphi” often is used in studies providing a predefined list of items in the first round of studies with a quantitative character. In our study we have followed the original concept developed by Project RAND, starting up with open ended questions and quantify them based on importance. In Delphi methods, studies have shown no firm rules for establishing when consensus is reached. We have not seen our combination of consensus methods in other studies, but individually the different methods are used. We used a pragmatic approach to determine which consensus method would tailor our data. As our Delphi is qualitative in its character, we wanted an in-depth rating of the statements, both by using several rounds and specification of the statements. As we ended up with 100 statements after round two, we found that in order to reduce the level of fatigue on the experts, it would be less time consuming to point out a given number of the most important statements, than to rate all the statements in three individual rounds. From round 1-2 the panel attrition was eight, while it was only two in rounds 3-5, indicating that it was a right thing to do.

Introduction and discussion
Q1: The discussion is way too long. I suggest that the authors cut the discussion back considerably.
A: Thank you for this advice. We agree, and have cut down on the discussion.
Q2: I also think that the Introduction could be much tighter, there is clearly a need for this research, but it could be stated a lot quicker.
A: We agree and have cut the introduction.
Q3: In the limitations, I think it is a big leap to generalise that others have found no difference between those who report and those who don’t.
A: We agree, this is removed.

Reviewer report (Dean Whitehead)
Q1: The introduction is quite laboured - and takes some time to get to the
purpose of the study.

A: Thank you for this advice. We agree and have cut the introduction considerably.

Q2: We don’t clearly know the criteria or credentials of the chosen 'experts' - a main flaw for a Delphi study.

A: An important point, thank you. We have included a table with the experts’ positions, and in the limitations we have discussed the use of a third person to choose the experts.

Q3: It is not clear where and how consensus levels were set. On page 17 the level is identified at 80% - but this is quite low.

A: We have revised the methods chapter in order to get the chosen consensus level more clear.

Q4: The 74 statements (which we do not know what they are - they are not appended and scored) emerged in the 3rd-round - but should always come in the 2nd-round after the qualitative analysis.

Q5: Not sure the reason for round 3. I take it because not enough questions were asked in round 1 - just two questions would be far too few.

Q7: Round 4 identifies the use of Likert scales to score. Typically this occurs in all rounds - except the first.

A (4/5/7): We are grateful for the suggestion and have added a table containing the statements in round three. In the second round, the respondents were asked to verify that statements were sorted under the correct category and that their opinion was retained in the consolidation. They were also asked to consider if their responses could be more specified. In addition they were instructed to add more statements if they had come up with some new. In this study the first and second round only served as a qualitative data collection. The second round was conducted to validate the data and the consensus process started in round three.

Q6: Picking out 20 'important' statements per expert is not how Delphi’s are usually conducted. Each of the 74 statements should be scored.

A: (Same answer as to Sarah MacIntyre’s “methods” Q3) In Delphi methods, studies have shown no firm rules for establishing when consensus is reached. We have not seen our combination of consensus methods in other studies, but individually the different methods are widely used. We used a pragmatic approach to determine which consensus method would tailor our data. As our Delphi is qualitative in its character, we wanted an in-depth rating of the
statements, both several rounds and specification of the statements. As we ended up with 100 statements after round two, we found that in order to reduce the level of fatigue on the experts, it would be less time consuming to point out a given number of the most important statements, than to rate all the statements in three individual rounds. From round 1-2 the panel attrition was eight, while it was only two in rounds 3-5, indicating that it was a right thing to do.

Q8: On page 17 - the analysis is missing vital detail. Mean scores are not identified and their appears to be no use of standard deviation measures for distribution. Fleiss kappa is mentioned - but not tabulated or reported anywhere.

A: Thank you for this important remark. We have added a table with details of analysis. Considering low N, we considered max-min score, median and mode as relevant. The values of Fleiss kappa is presented in table 4.

Q9: The discussion section, at 11 pages, is far too convoluted and laboured.

A: We agree. The discussion has gone through major revision in an attempt to address this comment.

Each of the comments was very useful and has allowed us to further improve our work. We look forward to your remarks and would be happy to make additional changes to the manuscript.

Yours sincerely,

Elisabeth Holen-Rabbersvik