Reviewer's report

Title: The relationship between local area economic conditions and the use of Veterans Affairs health services

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Reviewer: Marie-Josée Fleury

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Overall assessment:
The article is generally well written and pertinent. The question is well defined. The methodology is detailed and adequate. The discussion is overall well done. However, the conclusion could be greatly improved. Essentially, I have minor points of revision that should be taken into consideration in a revised published version.

Minor Essential Revisions:

Introduction:
For readers outside the US, more information is needed to better understand how the VA works. On page 5, it says that “Enrollment is determined by a veteran’s percentage connected disability and a financial means test (+ priority groups).” We can guess that a veteran is always eligible for VA benefits, but his/her access will depend on his/her profile (having a current job, private insurance, and health conditions)… The authors should explain how it works more precisely, including the links between access to the VA and to Medicare. In addition, it would be nice if the authors can give us some statistics about the gamut of coverage of the veteran population (e.g. the average percentage of people covered that have free minimum insurance such as inpatient or outpatient, etc.). In Canada and Europe, since there are public health care systems, this has to be better explained for these readers. As well, I presume that the policies of the gamut of services available will impact the cost of the VA – with or without economic pressure. The authors did not discuss that – were there some changes over the years in VA policies towards access and availability of services?

Methods:
Data used in this study are from the calendar years 2000, 2003, 2004. I wonder why these data are so old (Is there not more recent data that could have been used?).

Several variables (included in the Behavioral Model of Health Services Use) were considered and controlled in the analysis. However, there is no explanation about why these variables have been included; there is also no literature review justifying the inclusion of these variables in the model. There is abundant literature on variables such as age, gender, race, etc. (but: why body mass index,
and exercise behavior for example?). It would also have been pertinent to outline studies especially conducted with this population (veterans – because variables could play a different role depending on the population). Are there previous studies on veterans including these variables, and their impact on service utilisation?

I understand that the authors’ main question and interest are to evaluate “the relationship between local area economic conditions and the use of Veterans Affairs health services”, but it would have been also interesting to understand the links between some individual characteristics and this broad question. Are there some individual profiles more influenced by the economic pressure and VA access?

In addition, the author used hierarchical ordered logistic regression. Please specify the blocs entered and their order.

Results:
The presentation of the results, i.e. the descriptive analysis is very short. Could the authors present some other population characteristics such as the health variables?

Discussion:
P.14: “First, as the overall demand for health services increases with age, veterans may selectively choose to obtain some of their care from the VA”. This process is not clear (and it is in relation with my comments in the Introduction).

Ibid – this sentence has to be better explained: p.15 “However, a substantial number of veterans have access to other sources of health care, suggesting that VA use is a choice for many.”

Conclusions:
The conclusion should be more developed and include both new knowledge and impact on health care planning. The authors should also make some recommendations.

Other:
The authors used sometime “local area economic conditions”, sometime “states” – this should be more explicit and the terms uniformly used (states – I believe).