Reviewer’s report

Title: Factors associated with the utilization of primary care emergency centers in a Spanish region with high population dispersion: a mixed-methods study

Version: 3 Date: 6 September 2013

Reviewer: Joanne C Turnbull

Reviewer’s report:

This is a study of the use of PCECs in a sparsely populated area. I think the topic is interesting and there are some interesting findings in the paper. Some of the rationale and background for the study is a little confusing. The paper would benefit from some clarification / justification of methods and a clearer argument around health care utilisation for patients in sparsely populated areas. I am not a statistician so cannot comment on the appropriateness of MLM.

Major revisions

1. Whilst the methods section states that the interviews were designed to collect ‘healthcare professionals experience and perceptions regarding services’, much of the data presented draws on healthcare professionals’ perceptions of patient help-seeking behaviour. Surely, if the aim of the study is to understand patterns of utilisation in sparsely populated areas, the most reasonable approach would be to ask patients themselves rather than relying on healthcare professionals’ perceptions / opinions. I think this aspect of the study needs greater rationale / explanation about what the interviews with healthcare professionals really add, why this approach was chosen, and what might be the limitations of relying on ‘second hand’ interpretations of patient behaviour.

2. Under methods, the authors state that the ‘quantitative and qualitative data were collected from different geographical areas’. It’s not clear why the different types of data were collected from different geographical areas. This needs some explanation.

3. The study is presented as a mixed methods study, but it reads like a separate quantitative study and separate qualitative study was carried out and then the results have been presented here together. I would like to see more explanation of this mixing of methods – the rationale, purpose, and how the methods have been integrated to make it a truly mixed methods study.

4. How do ‘rural’ PCECs relate to ‘population dispersion’? How was rurality measured / defined in the context of ‘rural PCECs’?

5. Qualitative analysis is a bit ‘thin’ / superficial and it would benefit from a deeper analysis of the qualitative findings in relation to the quantitative findings on access to services. For example, you have identified a theme of ‘distance affects PCEC utilisation, but can you show with your data really why / how distance
might do this? You show what healthcare professionals THINK might be going on for patients, but have no data to really explain what might actually be happening from a patient point of view. Some of the arguments need substantiating a but more, and the pieces of a bigger picture you present here need to be put together in a way that addresses the aim of the paper. In a way, it doesn’t really matter that the health care professionals perceive distance as a barrier – it’s what the patient thinks that would be more crucial! For me, this is a flaw with the paper - and needs addressing (e.g. justifying the method, what this qual data REALLY adds etc).

Minor Essential Revisions

6. There are a number of typographical errors and the paper would benefit from some careful editing and proof reading e.g. Abstract ‘method – should be conducted not conducted; Background – services not servicers, determined not determinated, access not acces, ?organisation rather than organism

7. Under data sources I am not clear why the effective sample was 97.9% of the theoretical sample. What happened to the other 2.1%?

8. In background - Not clear what this sentence is trying to say - ‘variability of emergency services in primary care centers among nearby health areas is also understudied’. Needs rewriting to make this point clear.

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

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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