Reviewer's report

Title: Hospital Service Areas - A new tool for Health Care Planning in Switzerland.

Version: Date: 28 February 2005

Reviewer: Wilbert M Gesler

Reviewer's report:

General
This is a well-written paper that is not innovative in terms of concepts or methods, but is a solid contribution to health policy in Switzerland.
The question posed is not new, but replicate similar work done by Wennberg and others. The question is well-defined. The NPF index appears to be a new idea.

The methods are appropriate and well described and can be replicated by others.
The data are sound and well controlled. The discussion and conclusions are well balanced and adequately supported by the data. Reference should be made to Switzerland in the Objective of the abstract

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Maps should be constructed depicting the II and NPF indices and these should be briefly discussed in terms of the policy implications of any patterns that emerge. Since the authors have come this far, I believe they should exploit their data to make these useful maps.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. Mention the location of the study, Switzerland, in the Objective of the Abstract
2. p. 3. State the source of the LI and II indices in the paragraph titled HSA Characteristics
3. p. 3, bottom, first paragraph under Demographic/Geographic Characteristics, move the sentence "We gound a moderate correlation .....Spearman's rho = 0.69)" to the end of the paragraph where I believe it belongs.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

The concepts and methods are based mainly on the work of Wennberg and others, which is fine as they are the experts in small area analysis and that is the source of the authors' training in these methods. However, there is other literature on hospital service areas, which is mentioned briefly on p. 5 in the paragraph on Literature. Although I believe the authors used an appropriate method to delineate hospital service areas for this study, readers might want to know about other methods (eg., relevance and commitment indices) that have been used. Some references with which I am familiar are:

**What next?:** Accept after minor essential revisions

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests