Reviewer's report

Title: Characteristics of Primary Care Trusts in financial deficit and surplus - a comparative study in the English NHS

Version: 1  Date: 16 March 2006

Reviewer: Chris Ham

Reviewer's report:

General

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

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

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

This is an interesting paper on a topical issue. The paper establishes a number of associations between PCTs in deficit and the characteristics of these organisations. My comments are as follows:

1) association is not causation, and nor do the authors suggest as much. Nevertheless, I would have found it useful to have seen more analysis of the implications of some of the associations found to be significant
2) an example of this is the finding that deficit PCTs had a higher number of FCEs than surplus FCEs. One explanation of deficits would be that they result from supplier induced demand. It would be interesting to explore this further
3) similarly, I would have liked to have seen more discussion of the findings on alloactions per head of population and how they changed over time, and the relationship with deficits and surpluses
4) the paper would benefit from one or more hypotheses stated at the outset that the data and analysis could be used to test. Given this was not done, the paper is best seen as itself hypothesis generating. The authors should summarise their work by setting out clearly the hypotheses they now feel are worth testing.

What next?: Accept after discretionary revisions

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests