Reviewer's report

Title: The analysis of utility efficiency of community hygiene resources in China

Version: 1 Date: 17 December 2005

Reviewer: David Legge

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General

Urban community health centres (CHCs) are a relatively recent (re)development in China. The government has stipulated that they shall address six main functions.

The authors of this paper have visited CHCs in six cities in Eastern (economically advanced) China. They have collected data (regarding staffing, throughput, patient charges, administrative costs) regarding CHCs and hospitals in those cities. It is not clear whether the data were provided by local authorities or by the institutions nor how big the samples in each city might have been. It is not clear whether the team actually visited the CHCs and hospitals with a view to observation and discussion with staff and consumers. The findings are presented in terms of ‘utility efficiency’ which I think would normally be rendered as productive or technical efficiency.

Labour productivity (patient throughput per staff) is around three times greater in hospitals than CHCs. However prices are almost 4 times greater in the hospitals OPDs and income levels around 3 times greater in the hospitals. Consumers are thus paying much higher charges for much shorter consultations which undoubtedly accounts for the higher incomes.

Despite the much higher charges at the hospital OPD most consumers it appears still prefer to attend the hospital rather than the CHC. The authors attribute this to inadequate medical facilities, limited range of services and less highly qualified medical staff. Presumably some data regarding these factors were collected but are not presented in this report.

The authors are positive about the potential value of CHCs despite the findings of their research and conclude that achievement of this potential will require improved funding, upgrading the training and qualifications of medical staff, changed attitude of leaders and communities to CHCs and improved management. Their suggestions correspond to these conclusions.

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

I think that the methods section is inadequate. Such a paper should report where the data came from (I believe they were from city officials rather than the agencies themselves but this should be noted). I presume that the authors also visited at least some CHCs and hospitals and that they spoke with various informants. Certainly their findings go beyond the relatively limited financial and throughput data reported. I think the methods section should describe the broad approach to this aspect of the data collection.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
I think that it might be appropriate to acknowledge that the services being produced at the CHC and the hospital are not the same so the productive efficiency comparison is not really on a like with like basis.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

I think that there are some aspects of CHCs in China that the authors should perhaps have mentioned. Many CHCs in China are owned and operated by hospitals and serve a strategic purpose of staking out the catchment area and funnelling customers into the higher earning environment of the OPD. Some CHCs are administered through local administrative offices and street committees which involve quite a different relationship with the hospitals. I would have been interested to know how many of the CHCs studied at each city were hospital administered and how many were independent.

It is also the case that as a consequence of the personnel reform program of recent years many less qualified medical staff have been displaced from hospital employment and have found their way to CHCs. I don’t know if that is a feature of the CHCs studied in this research.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests