Reviewer's report

Title: A systematic evaluation of payback of publicly funded health and health services research in Hong Kong

Version: 1 Date: 1 May 2007

Reviewer: stephen robert hanney

Reviewer's report:

General
As pointed out when first asked to review this paper, I have a potential conflict of interest as the co-developer of the payback framework that has been adapted for use in this study. The editor thought, however, that given that I was upfront about this then there would be a benefit in having the paper reviewed by someone with detailed knowledge of the methods used. And, having said that, I do think this is a very sound application of the payback framework, with a high response rate to the survey, some important methodological developments and interesting findings. The paper would probably benefit from a few small amendments and there is just one point that I have put as a Major Compulsory Revision.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
1. I think it would be useful for the authors to consider revising the section on ‘Comparison with other research funds’. Whilst it is interesting to make such comparisons, there are some doubts as to whether the AHFMR study by Buxton and Schneider is an appropriate comparator to be used in the quantitative analysis presented in Figure 3. Unlike the other 3 studies used as comparators, and unlike the Hong Kong study reported in this paper, Buxton and Schneider used a case study approach based on a purposive selection process. The analysis would be stronger without the Buxton & Schneider work being included, and as I see it there would be a striking similarity in the pattern of figures from the remaining studies. Furthermore, whilst it is correct that there has been a long history of health research in the UK, the overall NHS R&D Programme was only established in the early 1990s, and the 2 payback studies each focused on specific programmes within the overall programme.

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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)
1. Acknowledgements: I am afraid I am not a professor.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
1. The account in the Results of the tobacco legislation being influenced by research is a good example, but I wonder whether it would be better presented by first being mentioned a few sentences earlier as another example of impact on policy, and then being drawn upon again as an example of a later impact?
2. Table 3: it might look better if the order of the columns reflected the previous analysis and Table 2 was: policy making, behaviour change, and health service benefits.

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: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:
As noted above I have a potential conflict of interest as it could be considered to be in my interests to see papers published that so clearly use the framework of which I was the co-developer.