Reviewer's report

Title: The professional collaboration is dependent of the quality of communication between hospital and general practitioners: a panel study of the content and quality of referral and discharge letters.

Version: 1 Date: 27 February 2007
Reviewer: Henk GA Mokkink

Reviewer's report:

General

This is a study on a very relevant and important issue. However, it is poorly reported (see comments below) and poorly elaborated. The term "professional collaboration" is used in the title and further on once in the abstract and once in the discussion, but not in the question posed. The concept of collaboration has hardly been the leading thought in determining what is vital information in the communication between collaborating doctors. The study is merely on the exchange of medical information (appendix information) and not on what should be the core content of letters that physicians write to each other in their professional collaboration: referring doctors asking questions and explaining the reason for referral, hospital doctors giving replies. One exception: the information on “follow-up responsibility after discharge” has to do with what one doctor expects the other to do in their mutual collaboration. Unfortunately, the assessment on this aspect is omitted in the tables.

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

title: "the professional collaboration" is not part of the study.

The quality criteria or quality indicators used in the "standardised evaluation protocol" are not described. So it remains unclear for the reader what is meant by quality of written communication. Is it the presence or absence of any information, as is the case in "social network" and "need of care" (see footnote table 2 and 3). But what is meant by quality of information on for instance medication? Is it the completeness (all medications, or all relevant medications), the correctness of the information or some other aspect? Please clarify your criteria.

Why the number of one hundred patients? Is this based on a power calculation or on practical considerations?

In the Methods it is stated that “the panels evaluated the information about medical history, symptoms, signs, medication”, etc.. In tables 1 - 3 symptoms are not mentioned. On the other hand “Follow-up responsibility after discharge” is not described in the Methods section.

In the Methods the term “level of care” is used. In the Results and tables the term “need of care” is used. Is it one item or do they represent different aspects. What is exactly meant by it?

How many referring doctors and how many hospital doctors were involved in the study, and were they anonymous to the panels?

There is a gap between the main objectives of this study and the analyses performed. Is the analysis of the agreement between panels and professions not a main objective? And why are the differences between the departments tested?

In the discussion new result are presented (In the present study there were no statistically significant associations between the quality of referral and discharge letters and the judgment of benefit of the hospital stay etc). This part should be moved to the Results section.

In the discussion attention should be paid to the limitations of this study, especially to the validity of the unreliable data and to the generalizebility of the findings based on data from one hospital.
Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

The words “agreement” and “consent” are used as synonyms. Is this correct English?

Table 3: What is the p-value referring to?

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Did you consider to analyse the relationship between the quality of the referral letters and the quality of the discharge letters?

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: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

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