Reviewer’s report

Title: Priority Setting, Wait Lists, and Public Involvement: A Qualitative Study

Version: 1 Date: 16 March 2007

Reviewer: Angela Bate

Reviewer’s report:

General

Overall I enjoyed the paper. I think it covers some important area of research but on the whole, I think that the paper tries to do too much. I think each of the results sections could be independent papers and including them all in the one paper compromises the quality of the paper. In particular I think that the presentation of the qualitative results is compromised and could benefit from some substantial rewriting and reference to the data. I have set out my concerns in the following 7 points in the order in which they occur in the paper.

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

1. It is not clear to me whether Part 1 (the description) is based on any qualitative analysis of the interview data or documentary evidence or whether it is simply based on a review of the literature (different to documentary analysis). On page 11 (last paragraph of this section) the use of "in interviews, some expert panel members ...) suggests that this section is based on interview analysis and documentary analysis. However, if this were the case it should be made more clear - for example do the headings that are used to structure the descriptions correspond to the main themes from the analysis, do you have any verbatim quotes that you can use to back up some of the statements made (either from interviewees or references from documents?) A statement such as that on page 9 first sentence, last paragraph: “the OWTS made a deliberate effort …” has to be substantially backed up. They may have made an effort – how ‘deliberate’ it was is interpretable from your analysis so the reader needs to see this. It may be for example that you need to revise some of the statements that you make to say something like: ‘from the documentary analysis it was evident that the OWTS depicted themselves as making a deliberate effort to … This can be demonstrated by … (then show the evidence of this)’. If this part is not actually based on the qualitative analysis then I would suggest that it is background information and would be better placed elsewhere (perhaps upfront in the paper) not in the results section.

2. There is no reference to Figure 1 – it just simply appears at the end of Part 1. Looking at the figure, it is not clear to me what the labels A through to G or what Box1 and Box2 represent.

3. The first part of the evaluation (Part 2 i) needs some introduction. For example, how many themes did you find in total, are you presenting the results under these themes? Furthermore, there should be explicit reference made to the quotes you use. How do these fit in with the overall story that you are telling? I particularly liked the section on benefits and concerns but thought that this should be expanded more. In particular I would also have liked to see the counter view if there was one for some of these points. For example if some participants expressed one thing did the others not express any view on this or did they express an opposing view? However, I think this section could also benefit from some substantial rewriting. In qualitative analysis it is not usual to be able to identify how participant “felt” (a word repeatedly used) or indeed what they “believed” – you can only interpret what they said they felt or believed (if respondents ever used these words). Similarly you cannot express how strongly or weakly they felt or believed something – you don’t know this.

4. The evaluation of the process, using the conceptual framework A4R, is again not extensive. Whilst I agree that this is a good framework to evaluate the OWTS process against, as a reader I can neither agree or disagree with observations made by the authors because they do not offer the evidence (either from the interview accounts or documentary evidence) to back up the claims that they make.

5. I have similar problems with the section on the consequences of the OWTS. Are these consequences themes identified from the interview accounts? If so, they should show the evidence for these. Again
expression of views as “felt” etc should be avoided. Also I would be interested to know if there were any participants that expressed contrary views.

6. I am not clear on where the plan for operationalising a public involvement strategy has come from. Although the authors state that it is “based on this analysis” (page 24 second paragraph) it is not clear whether the strategies have emerged from the participant interviews, the documentary analysis, or are the authors own views having reflected upon the data. All are legitimate but the section needs to be made clearer. You need to be clear about how you have arrived at these three strategies and show how you have drawn together all the evidence that you present in the results in order to make these assertions. Moreover it would be interesting to know whether you have fed these back to the participants that you interviewed in order to ascertain their views. As well as the above, the section would also need to be extended in terms of referencing work that other people have done the area. Are these strategies known to work well and under what conditions? I think that this section is far too short as it stands. Additionally, as a side, I was surprised that there was no reference to the work done by Julia Abelson and colleagues on enhancing the legitimacy of public involvement in Canada.

7. I feel a little uncomfortable about participants’ views on barriers to public involvement being presented as myths. This assumes that there is also an objective ‘truth’ or ‘reality’. It may be that participants discuss or describe barriers to public involvement in these ways for many different (not necessarily conscious) reasons. In particular they may construct the public (as biased, not interested etc…) because these are familiar narratives and they provide an answer to your question, or they may use them as an avoidance tactic - to avoid the difficult job of involving the public. Simply setting these up as myths that require debunking presumes that participants are not aware that they are telling you a myth – whereas they may actually be fully aware that it is a myth and are deliberately using it because it enables them to achieve some other end. It would be interesting to examine the participants transcripts in more detail and do more analysis of this sort on them – but that could be an entire paper in itself.

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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)

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

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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