Reviewer’s report

Title: Public involvement in the priority setting activities of a wait time management initiative: a qualitative case study and evaluation

Version: 2 Date: 6 June 2007

Reviewer: Wilfreda E Thurston

Reviewer’s report:

I still maintain that confusion exists about the purpose or goal of the study and what they report here as the data collected, then go on to discuss. The purpose is stated on p.5, ““to describe priority setting in the Ontario Wait Time Strategy (Ontario, Canada) and evaluate it with particular attention to public involvement.” I think they have managed to do both; however the discussion section addresses and assumes much more. We are told that “new lessons can be gleaned from this study, such as to how to enhance the legitimacy and fairness of priority setting and where and how the public can be engaged in the decision-making”. I cannot find the data pertaining to either of these points. I cannot find in the paper anything to help me understand how or where to involve the public. Rather I see another example of rapid implementation that does not permit careful planning for inclusion. What can planners do when governments impose such deadlines? The data do not address this. The data do reinforce the perceived value of public inclusion, but there is no data supporting the assumption that decisions would have been different or “better”. I do not see how this study fills the gap in knowledge of “how to practically involve the public in a wait time management strategy” (p. 30). Next, Figure 1 does not describe the “overall schematic of the entire wait time effort in Canada” – there is a brief schematic of the Federal and one provincial initiative. The statement is made, “As discussed in the introduction public engagement will bolster the priority setting of the OWTS.” Once again, where is the evidence? Is this a strongly held principle or is there data? (See their Response #14). The suggestions in Table 4 are generic and hard to relate to the OWTS described here. The OWTS reported here has a mixture of support for public involvement and decisions have already been made, now “public members” are going to be added to the expert panels. How will the timing effect the perception of this move? Why an “Advisory Panel” as opposed to a Citizens Panel or a panel with more than advisory power? Why is it only “citizens” that need to be educated about their responsibilities and mandate? Are focus groups the best method for ascertaining pubic views on benchmarks? If these and many more questions are to be answered a much more thorough referencing of the reported literature used to develop this table is needed. Perhaps that is a second paper regarding the team’s work – how they arrived at these recommendations based on their case study, knowledge exchange activities with the OWTS, the literature and how the recommendations were received. Who provided the accolades? Was the reception uniformly positive as there are people quoted in this study who are not sure that public involvement would be helpful or needed. What does that mean in terms of potential implementation of the proposed strategy?

The discussion represents over interpretation of the data reported here and is not congruent with the paper. This does not mean that the whole paper is ‘bad’. This paper provides a good example of using the Accountability for Reasonableness framework to assess or evaluate public participation in the OWTS. It suggests that people implementing WTS under pressure to meet deadlines will have difficulty involving the public in a meaningful way and it suggests that this may be detrimental to the strategy in the long run. It suggests that governments were not concerned enough about public involvement to allow time and other resources for the process. It suggests that government and health sector decision makers would benefit from exposure to the Accountability for Reasonableness framework. Perhaps timing of public involvement and certain goals for and processes of are more relevant to WTSs. It suggests that despite the research and writing about public engagement or participation or consultation and promotion of these as highly principled ways of making important decisions that the age old concerns and biases about the public (see p. 41) are still common. This may suggest that different research is needed in the future to assess interventions and learn how to overcome the barriers. All of this seems important to report in the published literature.