Reviewer's report

Title: Utilization and Expenditures of Veterans Obtaining Primary Care in Community Clinics and VA Medical Centers: An Observational Cohort Study

Version: 1 Date: 12 December 2006

Reviewer: Todd H Wagner

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Minor Essential Revisions

Utilization and Expenditures of Veterans Obtaining Primary Care in Community Clinics and VA Medical Centers: An Observational Cohort Study

The Veterans Health Administration rapidly changed in the 1990s from an inpatient-dominated system with limits on ambulatory care to a predominantly outpatient-based system. One area in which VHA changed was in its use of community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs). The authors have conducted a number of studies on these CBOCs and the current paper extends prior analyses in a number of ways, which largely result in stronger methods.

I see no fatal flaws with this paper, and offer suggestions that may help strengthen the paper’s presentation.

Introduction

1. The introduction is hard to follow. The first two paragraphs orient the reader to the issue at hand. Paragraphs 3-7 highlight potential problems with research cited in the first two paragraphs. Paragraphs 8 and 9 set for the five specific objectives of this paper. I would suggest the authors drop paragraphs 3-7. The rationale for this paper is sufficiently justified in paragraphs 8-9. Eliminating these four paragraphs would shorten the introduction, making it easier to read. Comparing the results of this paper to the prior papers should be done in the discussion.

Methods:

2. It is not clear how the types of care were created. I’m assuming this was based on the DSS identifier, but most categories of care would have many identifiers. Is this identified in prior papers, or can it be put into a footnote.

3. The authors calculated sampling weights (see bottom of page 8). It was not stated how these weights were calculated. Are they frequency weights or probability weights?

Discussion:

4. Like the introduction, I felt the discussion was fractured, making it hard to follow. In the discussion, paragraph 1 provides a take home message. Paragraph 2 emphasizes the point, although it is not clear that a whole paragraph is needed. Paragraph 3 and 4 acknowledge limitations. Paragraph 5 restates the take home message and then talks about potential selection bias (another limitation). Paragraphs 6 and 7 talk about selection in more depth, but much of this discussion is presented as speculative. I found paragraphs 5-7 particularly hard to follow. I don’t think there would be any loss if these three paragraphs were replaced by a simple statement about potential selection bias in paragraph 4.

5. I think it would be very useful for readers to see a paragraph that compared these results to prior results. The rationale for this paper was to extend prior work; hence I think it is incumbent on the authors to reconnect the results to the prior work—highlighting the main similarities and differences.

6. There are discussion points on cost containment. I don’t understand why cost containment is a raised here. I could imagine why VA managers would be concerned about costs. However, if there is a real concern that CBOCs will not contain costs, then this should be set forth in the introduction and the paper should address it in the methods/results. I think the authors should probably avoid the discussion on cost containment because this raises questions about financing and the underlying financial incentives for CBOCs. I do not think that is the focus of this paper. The authors might want to suggest in the discussion that there are concerns about cost containment and future results should assess revenues and
expenditures to determine how CBOCs are making money and what financial incentives they face.

Formatting and typos: There were some misplaced “}” from the citation software and some colloquial contractions (e.g., don’t) that can be cleaned up. Also in the second paragraph in the “adjusted utilization and cost” section the term “primary care” is missing the word “care”. Some spaces between words were also missing.

**What next?:** Accept after minor essential revisions

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

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No

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