Reviewer's report

Title: Priority Setting in the Provincial Health Services Authority: survey of key decision makers

Version: 2 Date: 26 February 2007

Reviewer: Tessa Tan-Torres Edejer

Reviewer's report:

General
1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined? 
The questions posed by the authors are relevant and well defined. They cannot be considered as new. As the authors themselves say, there have been other papers using this methodology before.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?
Yes, the methods are well described. However, for sampling, there was no justification for the choice of the 2 agencies selected versus other possible sampling frames (e.g. fewer respondents per agency but all agencies covered). The interview questions were provided although there is some lack of clarity with the accountability for reasonableness set of questions (if the reader is not familiar with this). Suggest that an annex be included to describe further what is meant by publicity, relevance, appeals, enforcement. The rest of the methods are described in detail and could be reproduced.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?
There is no control as this is a qualitative study. In terms of face validity, the results are coherent and conform with expectations.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
This study combine both results and discussion. As expected in qualitative studies, there is a sprinkling of quotes that are provided to buttress the main ideas that have been coded. It would have been good to see a statement on the interobserver reliability of coding that was done for a subsample of the transcripts of the interviews.

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? Yes.

7. Is the writing acceptable? Yes.

All in all, this is a well done and reported study of the results of a qualitative survey on priority setting in a single organization. All suggestions listed above are discretionary.

One important point: As a reader, I would have some difficulty reconciling what is described as the current mode of priority setting (mostly historical based on the results of the survey) versus a formal priority setting process in the same organization that utilizes a decision tool with 8 decision making criteria for new service initiatives which is intended to promote transparency/communication and had already been used for budget cycle 2005-2006 (reported in another journal). This is a bit jarring and needs some explanation.

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

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of limited interest
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'