Reviewer's report

Title: Need-based resource allocation: Different need indicators, different results?

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Reviewer: Jennifer Dixon

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General comment

The paper is an analysis of particular use in policy in Canada to help inform the limitations of the current methods of allocations of resources for health care between provinces. The paper demonstrates that allocating resources on the basis of population size gives different results compared to a method taking into account age and sex and need for care. This is an unsurprising finding, and it seems that what the paper adds is a demonstration of this using data across all the Canadian provinces. The analysis is broadly sound, explained well, and the paper clearly written.

More specific comments

The main weakness in my view of the paper is that, as the authors acknowledge, it is heavily reliant upon survey data. There may be biases - the survey contains information on only 111,000 or so of the population, and the survey relies upon self reported information from participants on needs for health care. The first point makes ecologic fallacy a potential problem, the second biases due to misreporting by certain (often the most needy) groups in society. I suspect the authors have used the only available datasets, but the paper could have a longer section in the discussion about these issues and how they may have contributed to the differing rankings across the provinces using the three methods. Also it would be interesting to know why administrative (ie routinely collected electronic data from health services on use and needs) data were not used, and whether or not there is the prospect of comparing the author's approach with survey data with the same approach using administrative data in the foreseeable future. Nothing is said of how provinces decide upon intra provincial allocations - is a resource allocation formula developed at this level using administrative data?

Also as the authors acknowledge they lacked measures on non-need determinants of utilisation, but it is not clear why. Again the lack may be in part because of problems accessing administrative data across all provinces. A fuller discussion would be useful on this, and indeed what supply factors it would be most useful to include as a priority.

The paper is an analytical piece not a policy paper, but if government officials/policymakers were reading it I think they would find it useful if the authors addressed the issue of where next for Canada with respect to making
interprovincial adjustments based more on need. What are the priorities and over what time period?