Reviewer's report

Title: The long-term care in Italy: an ecological study on the relationship between supply and health needs of elderly

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Reviewer: Richard Saltman

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This article seeks to assess the relationship across Italian Local Health Units (LHU) between the need for long term care services and the availability of services to meet that need. It presents a useful snapshot of the need for future development of long term care in Italy in the future.

The article’s main conclusion – that the wealthier LHUs in the north have fewer needs but greater availability of services and supplemental payments to citizens – fits with what is known about the general distribution of both needs and services in Italy.

The current version of the manuscript could be strengthened by a discussion of the different factors that might help explain why the observed results might have occurred. For example, on pages 9-10, the distribution of self-reported ill health is double that of Bolzano (12%) in Sicilia (26%). Among the factors one might cite could be geographical (Bolzano is a mountainous area where citizens walk more), economic (lower incomes in Sicily), cultural (differences in self-definition of ill-health), educational, social, etc. These would all be useful to readers seeking to understand the differences that are observed. These factors also are essential for policymakers – the avowed target of this study – to understand the causes of the greater need that is unmet, and the degree to which they might develop programs to reduce that need rather than just build up more expensive services, especially bricks-and-mortar housing services such as nursing homes.

Additionally, a small point, there are occasional English language lapses (p. 11 bottom “handout” is a pejorative, better to use “payment”) that should be corrected.