Reviewer's report

Title: The use of evidence in public governmental reports on health policy: An analysis of 20 Norwegian official reports

Version: 1 Date: 20 January 2009

Reviewer: Benedicte Carlsen

Reviewer's report:


I find this study is interesting and relevant, but I do have some serious objections to the argumentation and presentation of findings.

Major compulsory revisions:

As far as I can see there are two main problems with this manuscript which I will mention here and discuss in detail in my comments to the different sections:

1. You need to be clearer about the different levels of analysis, as I read it now it is often confusing. There are several levels to keep track of in this study; your own meta-analysis (review and assessment) of the NOUs; the meta-analysis of the NOUS; your review of the ISQ instrument (for use by the NOUS to evaluate scientific reports or for evaluation of NOUs?). This is a complex picture which needs be very orderly and clearly explained for the reader to follow your arguments.

2. I find the following argumentation problematic: Your start by deciding (without telling the reader why) to use the ISQ to evaluate the scientific quality of the NOUs and (on p 4) that if the reviews of effects in the NOUs are transparent and explicit, the policy makers may weigh the evidence of effects against other factors that they would like to consider, but then you go on to argue that ISQ may not be a relevant instrument to inform policy makers of the NOUs qualities because it only assesses scientific evidence. This makes me wonder why you chose that instrument in the first place and whether you intended to evaluate the usefulness of the ISQ instruments for wider purposes then simply assessing the scientific quality? Maybe the paper would have been clearer without involving an evaluation of the ISQ instrument?

The abstract:

3. The aim or parts of the aim of the study are repeated six times during the manuscript and the meaning is not consistent. I would advice you to reduce this to no more than three; describe the aim in the abstract, in the introduction and perhaps once in the discussion or conclusion.

4. Description of aim: Please be clear about whether both the NOUs' processes
of systematic searches and their synthesis of evidence are to be evaluated. It is also unclear to me if only NOUs that assess questions of effect are to be included in this study. This should also be clarified in the description of inclusion criteria. In addition I would like to know if you actually are evaluating the synthesis of recommendations as you say here. I get the impression elsewhere that you are evaluating the synthesis of evidence, i.e. are the NOUs to be evaluated as reviews or as meta-analyses?

5. It is unclear in the abstract whether the ISQ is developed for evaluating scientific reports or government reports, reviews, meta-analyses or single studies?

The background:

6. Page 4, second paragraph, last sentence: Please explain which kind of documents you are referring to. UK documents? If similar studies have not previously been conducted on Norwegian government reports this information would be relevant here.

7. In the end of the section, it would be relevant to state what expectations or hypothesis you had regarding your study of the Norwegian NOUs.

The methods:

8. I find the description of methods messy and difficult to follow: I think you need to explain some more about the ISQ-instrument. For what purposes was it designed and why did you choose this instrument? What are the questions taken from the ISQ? Are they similar to point 4 in box 1? Or is perhaps box 2 taken form the ISQ-score? How does box 1 relate to box2? Box 2 seems to be an elaboration of component 3 in box 1, but this is not very explicit as the reference to box 2 is placed after the description of the ISQ-instrument in the text. Also you state that component four is the main focus of the study, so why is component 3 highlighted in a new box?

9. The reader needs to know about the selection process and your evaluation. Were the NOUs not evaluating effectiveness excluded from the study? And if so, from which component of the study are they not included? Why did you choose NOUs to represent government reports and why was the time span 1994-8 chosen?

10. In the description of the first component, arguments as for example for why the data search should be transparent, are repeated. These should be moved to the introduction or discussion sections.

11. Page 6, first paragraph, last sentence: Are you referring to the results of only the last component here? Also it seems that only figure 2 illustrates the eight factors.

12. Page 7, first paragraph: The first half of this paragraph belongs with the results. It is also confusing that this paragraph apparently describes the first component of the study, but is presented last.
The results:

13. It is difficult to understand the logic in the structure of the results. After some searching, it appears that the subtitles are partly consistent with the component 1, 2 and 4 in box 1, but why is component 3 left out?

14. Also I suggest that the eight questions that you claim are the main results (figure 2) should be highlighted in the structure of the results in the text.

15. In the paragraph, “Strategy used to collect data”, the effect of types of committee participants is described and analysed. I find no reference that this was supposed to be part of your study in the introduction, aim or methods section, nor is this finding mentioned in the discussion.

16. How are the 119 evaluations extracted? How does this number appear? How are they distributed across the 17 studies?

17. In the discussion I miss a comparison of these results with the results of other evaluations of government reports that have used the same instrument. Are these NOUs scoring higher or lower than other government reports? (And what about the mean quality scores of scientific publications?)

18. Page 10, first paragraph: I do not understand what is meant by “how the evidence related to other findings in the field”. Do you refer to how the evidence found in the NOU (based on a review or meta-analysis, or review of meta-analyses) relates to other types of evidence or how evidence from different individual studies used in the NOU relates to each other? I suspect my confusion here is due to the general confusion of levels that the manuscript conveys.

19. Also the information that only five of the reports discuss more than one study should be placed in the beginning of the results, as this is basic information about the sample of NOUs.

20. Then you go on to say that “The other reports provided no information about consistency between studies.” Does this refer to the other 12 studies and does this mean that these reports are based on one single study or are they based on several but do not discuss consistency between studies? Please clarify.

21. I would also like to be informed about the level of consistency; whether “consistency” here refers to consistency between studies in the reports or consistency in the reports’ meta-analyses of different studies.

22. Also regarding the question about consequences: Please specify whether this point assesses A) the reports’ assessment of consequences or B) whether the individual studies used in the reports report consequences.

23. The subtitle “Recommendations and summary” is confusing because you might think it is about recommendations and summary of this study. It is also confusing that this section, which relates to component 3, is placed after the section describing component 4. Also I miss any reference to question 3B.
The discussion:

24. Based on the results I think the first thing to discuss should be the scientific quality of the NOUs. I fail to see that the results of this study call for conclusions about the usefulness of the ISQ-instrument and the discussion regarding this appears speculative (see my main point about argumentation above). Nor do I find this question relevant as long as the policy makers in Norway have not explicitly asked the researchers to evaluate the NOUs according to the ISQ. If the evaluation of the ISQ shall be part of this paper at all, we need more information about former evaluations of the ISQ, about which policy makers, in which countries argue for evidence based government reports, and when these statements are given. Also, it must be clear whether component 3B is part of the ISQ-instrument and also the results from point 3B must be presented.

25. Page 12, first paragraph, second phrase: Once again the aim of the study is repeated inconsistently: “The main concern in this article is the difficulty in determining how recommendations relate to evidence.” To me this is unclear. To whom is it difficult? Is the main aim the problems for the researcher to evaluate the NOUs according to the ISQ? The same point could be made about the first sentence of the second paragraph. Here you also need to be clear about the level of analysis. Some issues were difficult to assess to you or the authors of the NOUs?

26. In this chapter the possibility of bias in the report is mentioned. Here I would expect a reference to the information in the results about different types of NOU authors.

27. The subtitle “From sample to population” is about strengths and limitations of the study. It would be clearer to reformulate the title accordingly and perhaps remove the other subheadings that relate to the NOUs and not to this study.

28. Also the discussion of methods should be more elaborate.

29. On page 12 a suggestion for future research is given. This would fit better in the conclusion were other implications are drawn. In addition the suggestion is a bit unclear: For what do you suggest “mapping out the pros and cons from different practices”?

The conclusion:

30. Both in the conclusion and in the discussion I miss a thorough discussion of the results. The discussion of the usefulness of the ISQ-instrument is not supported in the data and should be played down. Also, as the reader has no reason to expect that future NOUs will focus upon the ISQ criteria, the focus on the usefulness of the ISQ seem exaggerated.

31. I have problems following the main argument in the conclusion: I read the argument as follows: A systematic, explicit, and transparent approach in NOUs generate evidence based decision making, and is necessary to use the ISQ. Policy makers ask for scientific evidence, but maybe scientific evidence is not the
most relevant information for policy makers?

32. This argument is not convincing and not according to the main aim or findings in the study. In addition it appears a bit arrogant: If the politicians want evidence, then who are we as researcher to tell them to remember to also consider their political aims and other pragmatic concerns?

Minor essential revisions:

The abstract:

33. I would like to know if Norway is one of the countries you mention in the first sentence.

The Background:

34. The sentence: Previous studies of health policy documents investigated… Please add “have” after “documents”.

35. Page 4-5, last paragraph. Some of the sentences are difficult to understand. Please improve the language.

The results:

36. Please mention why three NOUs are excluded. Are the seventeen included NOUs all about effects?

37. “Recommendations and summary”, first sentence: Please change to: “Part 3A in box 1 asks whether the committee stated how they valued and weighted the different aspects of costs, …”

38. The discussion:

39. Page 13, first sentence: The sentence does not make sense. I believe either it should say “Even if the NOUs had included” or “When the NOUs included”. Please correct.

40. Page 14, last paragraph of the discussion: Another version of the aim of the study. This contains an important clarification that would have been informative for the reader to see in the introduction of the study.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

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

**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.