Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Maureen Dobbins

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Manuscript Review:
The Use of Evidence in public governmental reports on health policy: An analysis of 20 Norwegian official reports (NOU)

Review: Maureen Dobbins

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

The question posed by the authors is well defined and of high importance to the field of evidence-informed decision making. Two specific questions were identified and answered in this paper:

1) Whether the scientific evidence of effect used in health policy document in Norway were transparent and explicit, and
2) Whether the examination of the evidence of effect was clearly identified and scrutinized.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

The authors identified all NOUs commissioned by the Norwegian Department of Health and Care Services between 1994-1998. All those NOUs that reported evidence of the effect on health were included in this study.

A tool was developed that assessed 4 components of the NOUs. Component 1 assessed the language of the mandate, of whether the committee was supposed to evaluate evidence of effect. The second component assessed the strategy used for gathering research information, including whether the intentions of the committee were research based, how the committee gathered information, and where it went to collect its data. The third component is an overall assessment of the recommendations and the summary. The fourth component was an assessment of the way in which the committee used the scientific evidence.

The identified components are reasonable and appropriate. The components are then used to develop an ISQ score. ISQ scores have been discussed at length and used according to a google scholar search conducted by the author and seems appropriate to use for this study.
3. Are the data sound?
Data are taken from 19 NOUs commissioned between 1994 and 1998. The process for determining the specific question of effect of the mandate, as well as how the data were extracted and agreed upon are described adequately.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
Yes, no issues here at all.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
Generally the discussion and conclusions are fine. I have one concern I would like the authors to address however. While I agree with the author’s arguments that the ISQ is likely too research focused to be overly useful for policy makers, and agree with their recommendations concerning questions of effect, there is one area I would like to see additional discussion on. Given the results generally showed that all reports were of relatively poor quality with respect to searching for evidence of effect, quality of the evidence, how this evidence compares to other evidence in the field, I would like to see some additional discussion of what this means for evidence-informed decision making. Can we assume then that EIDM was not happening at the policy level from 1994-98, given the NOUs rated so poorly on the ISQ. How might this be different now in 2009 in terms of what the Norway government is asking for. I think some attention to where most organizations were at with EIDM in the mid 90s, in contrast to where we have come by late 2000’s is an important discussion that needs to be intertwined into this paper, given the data were collected such a long time ago. What hypotheses can be made about the value policy-makers place on evidence, given the mandates themselves did not specify that the use of high quality evidence had to be demonstrated. How does the language of the mandates need to change in order to facilitate use of high quality evidence. What other changes need to happen at the policy level in order to promote a valuing of high quality evidence in decision making.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
While the authors discusses limitations of using the ISQ for this purpose, I did not see a discussion of limitations of this study itself. Perhaps some attention to limitations would be useful. For example, to what extent did pairs of researchers agree on extracted data. How much discussion had to occur to achieve consensus. The age of the data (94-98) and how this relates or not to current practice more than one decade later.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
Yes.

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

9. Is the writing acceptable?
The paper is very well written and flows logically from one section to the next.

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

**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