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: Karin Guldbrandsson

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Comments on
The use of evidence in public governmental reports on health policy: An analysis of 20 Norwegian official reports (NOU)

Dear author and editors,

The topic dealt with in this paper is important and interesting and I hope the author will be able to respond to my queries, suggestions and comments. I have some major concerns, mainly regarding the method, and some minor comments.

Best regards,
Karin Guldbrandsson

Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
There are no explicit research questions. In the abstract two aims are stated. “The first aim is to make a rigorous evidence-based policy-evaluation (is that correctly expressed?) of how government-appointed committees in Norway assess questions of effect in their reports; whether the process of synthesising recommendations is comprehensive and explicit; and the ways in which committees use scientific knowledge. The second aim is to discuss important shortcomings in such rigorous evaluation.” In the background section it is written (page 5 line3) “… this is an empirical study which examines whether the scientific evidence of effect used in health policy documents in Norway were transparent and explicit, and whether the examination of the evidence of effect was clearly identified and scrutinised.” These two parts of the text should agree.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
The method section needs to be clarified, see comments below.

Are the data sound?
Yes, the initiative to utilise NOUs in order to study the use of evidence in public governmental reports on health policy is fine.

Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
Yes, on the whole. Minor comments below.

Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
The discussion and the conclusion sections could be improved, see suggestions below.

Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
No, the limitations of the method ought to be better described and discussed, see comments below.

Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building?
Yes, an additional reference suggested below.

Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Yes, on the whole.

Is the writing acceptable?
Yes, but I am not a native English-speaking.

Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

Page 5, line 2-3: Remove: “Instead of one more discussion paper on evidence-based policy-making,”

Page 6, The Index for Scientific Quality, line 2-3: Remove “The index is discussed by others, with 35 citations in Google scholar in August 2008 [33].”

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
The aim of the study is quite clear to me, but the text is not consistent between the abstract and the background section.

Page 5, line 6-7: The final sentence, including references 14-29, in the background section is not necessary (outside the scope as the author states).

Under Results, page 7, after the first sentence, add something like: “Three NOUs were excluded due to …., resulting in a total of 17 analysed NOUs”.

Page 8, under Strategy used to collect data. Expert participation is not mentioned in the Method section but appears under Results.

Consistent use of numbers, page 10 Figure three or Figure 3 (Figure 1 and
A short description of the main results either at the bottom of the result section or at the beginning of the Discussion section provides a good service to potential readers. The sentence on page 11, line 8-10, is appropriate.

Box 1. Consistent use of (Yes/No), either after the component (as in 1) or after the questions (as in 2). Bold or not bold?

Box 3. Explain also in the box why the excluded NOUs are excluded.

Figure 1. Refer to Box 1, component 4, question A-G. Judgements wrong spelt. Why is overall quality not included?

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

I had to read the text in the method section, page 5, the final 7 lines to page 6, line 1-3, several times and compare it with the text in Box 1, and the text under Results (The mandate, Strategy used to collect data, Scientific quality and Recommendations and Summary) to understand how these parts of the manuscript were linked. E.g. the first of the four components is labelled “The mandate’s description of the task” in Box 1, “the language in the mandate” in the Method section and “The mandate” in the Result section. Please use similar wording in the different parts of the paper which deal with these four components. It is also confusing that the four components are not presented in order in the Result section (component 4 is presented before component 3).

I recommend a more comprehensive description of the ISQ, especially the modified version used by the author. Is this version of the ISQ tool validated? Box 2 is informative, but only regarding component 3 “The use of evidence in recommendations and in the summary”. A corresponding Box for component 4 “Evaluation of the quality of scientific evidence” is needed.

Page 8 under Scientific quality. Since the 119 evaluations are not mentioned under the Method section I had to read this sentence several times to understand what was meant. A parallel to Box 2 would probably clear this up. The text under this heading repeat what is shown in Figure 1.

Page 11, paragraph 2, line 4-5: remove the sentence “Dissemination is an important matter to consider, as many evaluators have [37-39], it is not relevant. Explain the reference to Kingdon [42] or remove it.

The Method description in general has to be straightened up, e.g. the text under Four main components. The sentences on page 6, line 1-3, “The main focus in this paper is the fourth component, the way the committee USES scientific evidence. The results are contained in three figures that break down the evaluation into eight factors (each based on a specific question)” have to be clarified. This also applies to the text under the heading The selection of questions of effect, beginning with “A list of questions for all reports ...”, page 7.
The “predefined scheme developed from the questions in box 1 and box 2” has to be further described.

The method limitations, e.g. the modified version of the ISQ, ought to be discussed.

Under Conclusions, the text beginning with “Reports that focus upon the ISQ criteria …” should fit better under Discussion than under Conclusion. The “Other frameworks exist [14-29] should either be remover or developed under the Discussion section.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**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.