Reviewer's report

Title: The effects of an area-based intervention on the uptake of maternal and child health assessments in Australia

Version: 2 Date: 15 September 2008

Reviewer: Catherine Law

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for asking me to review this paper which I read with interest. It describes a pragmatic study to evaluate elements of the Best Start initiative. Given the prevalence of new interventions for early years, many of which lack evaluation, this paper is on an important topic.

I thought the paper was clearly written and very balanced. The study is simple and the authors were evidently under some constraints. Nonetheless, they have made the best of the opportunity they had whilst providing a balanced interpretation of what the study can tell us (given the optimal design of a randomized trial was not feasible). I have a few comments/suggestions.

Major comments

1. Background Para 3. It might be noted here or elsewhere eg in the discussion, that randomized allocation for the introduction of these types of programmes are entirely feasible and, as Macintyre has argued, may be more ethical as well as more informative.


2. Methods para 1. The design depends on being able to identify which Best Start projects had “MCH projects”. The authors need to define “MCH projects” and discuss how easy it was to classify Best start projects according to this (though probably misclassification would bias the results to the null).

3. Analysis:It is not obvious what the variable “seen information about the 3.5 year Ages and Stages visit” indicates if one is unfamiliar with this health system. The authors need to explain how information about this might generally be seen, or not.

4. Results – parents surveys. There were very high levels of parental confidence. The authors might discuss this and what it implies for a population (versus targeted) approach.

Minor comments

1. Background- para 2. There is now a more recent evaluation of Sure start, which I believe can be accessed via the National Evaluation of Sure start website http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/. National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS). The impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on three year olds and their families.
2. Best start para 3 – the term “major health outcome” requires some explanation. Is the breastfeeding data reported elsewhere?

3. Maternal and child health services; Non-Australian readers would probably like to know whether these services are free for all, means tested etc and if there are socio-economic inequalities in their uptake.

4. Discussion: Para 3 last two sentences (starting “Consequently, we can not…”) seem to contradict each other. How does the study add insight into parents’ motivation if causal mechanisms cannot be deduced?

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

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I have a longstanding research interest in early life and life course epidemiology.