Reviewer's report

Title: Six principles to enhance health workforce flexibility

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Reviewer: Robyn Stone

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I found this to be a very interesting and provocative manuscript. It is certainly timely as many countries are engaging in health care reforms.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The paper needs to begin with a definition of what the author means by “health workforce”. There are examples scattered throughout the manuscript, but the scope of the workforce is not clear to me. Are we talking about just clinical, administrative, medical and social care?

2. In the discussion of no real regulatory barriers, the author needs to be more explicit about the history of professional guilds and the turf battles that have arisen inter- and intra-professionally. This has become a critical issue in the U.S., for example, in the nursing arena. The associations promoting that all nurses must have a master’s degree to practice in certain settings bump up against the workforce shortage and the fact that LPNs do much of the frontline work and supervision, particularly in nursing homes. They are fighting to protect their turf, often with lack of evidence that one is more appropriate than the other.

3. The second principle should be “Minimize training times”. Incremental credentialing is one strategy for addressing this issue and should be included in the narrative supporting the principle but not in the principle itself.

4. I am a little confused by principle 3. Is the author suggesting that one practitioner should have all the skills? This is contradictory to the rest of her argument. I think this principle is really about a multidisciplinary approach to care that ensures that all skills are there to perform the tasks in the specific environment.

5. In the discussion of principle 4, the author indicates that there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the current professional organization model is flawed. There needs to be some citations to back this up. Similarly, the discussion of professional politics needs to be illustrated more clearly--what are the political issues that prohibit more flexibility, efficiency and better care delivery?

6. The author identifies the lack of consumer knowledge about which service to purchase. It is also important to note that the consumer does not know which competencies to look for. In that same paragraph, the author seems to support a “jack of all trades” aged care worker rather than relying on a multidisciplinary team. This seems to contradict the principle above. Needs clarification!
1. In the section on introducing new roles, the author may want to use some other illustrations. In the U.S., there is increasing use of nurse practitioners and physician assistants to do much of the work that primary care physicians have been doing. They are also likely to be running clinics etc. This is a major transformation that produces efficiencies and better care outcomes.

2. There is a lot of overlap between principle 2 and principle 4 in the area of incremental credentialing. Maybe there should be a reference to this intersection.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.