Reviewer's report

Title: Joint special issue, E.25: 'On-site' versus 'off-site' facilitation: a randomised trial of outreach strategies for scaling up kangaroo mother care

Version: 1 Date: 4 February 2008

Reviewer: Nils N Bergman

Reviewer's report:

Minor Essential Revisions

1. The question posed is clearly enough stated at the end of the background section. However the information and arguments presented up to that point introduce other concepts which do not make very clear what the actual study may be about. "Sustainable" intervention is introduced, and a reader may expect the paper to address this, it does not. A followup at six months only measures initiation, and does not equate to sustainability.

2. (Discussion says "off site thought to be ineffectual", no reference)

3. But the conclusion presented makes a far broader statement or assertion than the study conducted in this paper warrants. It is almost certainly a true assertion, but the conclusion of this particular study was only in relation to the last aspect, that "on site or centre of excellence" are equivalent. This is a useful piece of information for a health systems manager, and potentially very important for planning large scale implementations (as the authors point out)

Discretionary Revisions

4. Effectiveness in implementation (paragraph 2) is perhaps what is being studied and could be more emphasized. The paper could benefit by looking at the strategies of Grimshaw, and then focusing on the "face-to-face" aspect, and then offering an explanation as to why two different forms of face-to-face are worthy of study. I think they are, but I do not why the authors asked the question

5. I am not sufficiently informed in the field, but I wonder whether "visit to centre of Excellence" does not qualify as an adequate intervention, as quite distinct from "face-to-face" facilitation. Grimshaw's view on this (or lack thereof) would perhaps add value to the paper.

6. (Discussion says "off site thought to be ineffectual", no reference)

And both are intrinsically hard to define in a way that makes it impossible to replicate the study: the nature and quality of either can vary substantially. On site consisted of two relatively short visits, off site by one much longer visit.

7. Grimshaw identifies "development of protocols" as a key factor, and the method includes "Development of a plan of action by each hospital".
This study then ensures two essential factors for implementation success in both arms (package and protocols), both of which may be adequate per se to produce the results shown. In other words, what control does the study have for any effect at all of the “face-to-face” intervention (in whatever form)? In the discussion this is acknowledged, (paragraph 2), and the conclusion should then perhaps be much more guarded.

8. If one of the centres of excellence was the same as that of the authors, a measure of control could be achieved by “standardizing” the facilitator input of the “on site” versus “off site”. Perhaps the data would allow such a sub-analysis?

9. How the data is actually collected, collated and analyzed is only briefly described, reference is made to an earlier paper. The paper might be strengthened by a box or footnote to Figure that would allow an uninitiated reader to better understand the flow from Figure 2 to 3 to 4.

10. The authors suggest “choice of strategy depends on local circumstances and cost”, another key factor of local circumstances when going to scale is the (poor) availability of skilled facilitators, which would make the Centre of Excellence approach more efficient.

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

The title: YES.
The abstract, yes, perhaps with exception of conclusion as discussed above.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

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.