Reviewer’s report

Title: Challenges in physician supply planning: the case study of Belgium

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Reviewer: Marie-Gloriose Ingabire

Reviewer’s report:

Overall, this is a good paper. The authors were able to describe the challenges but improvements can be made, especially to address the paper’s objectives: to identify the key challenges in HRH planning in Belgium and to formulate recommendations for an effective HRH planning.

More specifically, the focus of the paper moves quickly from HRH planning in Belgium to HRH policies in selected European countries. This is done through comparisons of country policies but some policies are only described for other countries than Belgium and no mention or comparison to Belgium is done (e.g. paragraphs 4 and 5 under Specialty Imbalances section and the fifth paragraph under Geographical distribution of medical practitioners section are about France; and paragraph ninth or last paragraph under Geographical distribution of medical practitioners section is about Germany and Austria).

Therefore, this paper could be about “Challenges in Physician Supply Planning in Selected European Countries” instead of focusing only on Belgium. In that case, it would be useful to add in the introduction section of this paper, the list of selected European countries to be included in this paper (e.g. France, Austria, Germany, The Netherlands). There is mention of other European countries all across the paper that it should be clear upfront.

As mentioned above, the authors were able to describe the challenges but came short on the recommendations, especially in relation to the identified challenges. Given the described challenges, what would be the recommendations for Belgium and selected European countries? This area needs more work.

More specific comments and requests for clarification:

- The paper states that it is not assessing models; however the fourth paragraph under the “Right Number” section is solely dedicated to scenarios modeling.
- At the end of the third paragraph under Specialty Imbalances, are the available positions in all specialties outweighing student numbers or only for general practitioners?
- Under Geographical distribution of medical practitioners section, end of first paragraph: it is stated that the low numbers of physicians in rural area have more to do with retention than with recruitment – could this statement be verified? Are the medical practitioners being “easily” recruited and then leaving the rural area shortly after getting there? Or is it also hard to recruit them?
Overall suggestion: A table summarizing the various policies and their impact or key challenges associated with them would be very helpful.

Typos and repetitions:
- Fifth paragraph under International mobility of students and practitioners: repetition (“the Commission officially… against Austria and Belgium”)
- First paragraph under Dynamic approach: the statistics applied ARE methodologically bounded.

**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