Reviewer's report

Title: Towards the construction of health workforce metrics for Latin America and the Caribbean

Version: 1 Date: 15 February 2011

Reviewer: Neeru Gupta

Reviewer's report:

Manuscript title: 'Towards the construction of health workforce metrics for Latin America and the Caribbean.'

Authors: Gustavo G Nigenda JR, Maria H Machado, Fernando F Ruiz, Victor V Carrasco, Patricia P Moline and Sabado S Girardi.

Submitted to: Human Resources for Health.

Manuscript type: Research.

Reviewer: Neeru Gupta.

Reviewer's report

It is encouraging to see manuscripts such as this submitted for publication consideration in the Human Resources for Health journal. I believe the international health community and country stakeholders will benefit from more research generation and dissemination on strengthening the evidence base on HRH, including the processes and outcomes for measuring and monitoring workforce performance. That said, when reading the manuscript I was somewhat confused as to its purpose. Is it a “research” article focusing on the methods and results of a systematic review according to scientific research processes? Or is it a “case study” presenting the rationale, institutional partners and activities of a major cross-national initiative to better understand and document HRH performance measures? A “review” article synthesizing recent insights on HRH performance measurement as applicable in the LAC region? Or a “commentary” on the impact of limited documentation on HRH metrics to inform decision making in selected LAC countries?

As a major compulsory revision, the nature and objective of the manuscript needs to be clearly stated in the Background section, and the content re-organized to clearly address the defined objective. The paper currently jumps between focusing on the methods/results of the literature review and the actors involved in the review process. The Results section extends with commentary that often does not seem to be a direct finding of the literature review. Moreover, the sequencing of the paper makes it difficult for the reader to understand how
the “common metrics” framework was derived and why. Three priority areas (training, labour market and working conditions) are first mentioned as having been established in 2008, then four areas are identified in the subsequent “conceptual framework”; the fourth (regulation) is dropped from the Methods section but then re-emerges under Results. This needs to be consistent (even if to mention no documentation was found). Figure 1 is not particularly detailed or helpful in illustrating/clarifying the framework.

Additionally, the list of international initiatives reviewed in the “Background” section is far from comprehensive, and somewhat chronologically confusing. It emphasizes two international efforts (the WHO’s WHR2006 and the JLI report) likely to already be well known among HRH journal readers. It would be more beneficial to readers to focus on initiatives specific to the LAC region, and/or review how the aforementioned international initiatives complemented (or not) regional/country initiatives in the LAC context.

-Minor Essential Revisions

1. The results of the literature review, including the publications listed in Table 2 as containing information relevant to HRH metrics, need to be properly referenced (e.g. the 33 documents listed in an “additional file”).

2. In the Abstract, the second sentence of the Methods sub-section should be revised, focusing on the search processes/parameters rather than the classification (which is more appropriately placed under “Results”).

3. In the third paragraph of the Background section, the reference to the declaration of the World Health Report would be more appropriately sourced to the original WHO report (currently identified in its Spanish version as #10 in the reference list), rather than the two secondary sources (the Observatory report and the previously published 2000 UN report).

4. Given the emphasis of this manuscript on the literature review, the Methods section should include specific details on the search parameters (i.e. list all databases searched, not just a generic statement “such as…”). The authors should also explain why the search words used were not exactly the same in Spanish/Portuguese as in English (could this have biased the results?). What about the French language (e.g. to cover Haiti and francophone dependent entities in the region)?

5. Given the small sample size (33 documents), it is inappropriate to include decimals in the presentation of quantitative results, both in the tables/figures and within the text.

6. Among the References, two of the same reference are identified twice but should not be repeated as separate entries (items 7 and 8 as well as items 9 and 18).

7. The mention in the “Data collection and analysis” sub-section of a second phase involving other regions should be moved to the Conclusion within the
context of the discussion of “next steps” - given both the confusing timeline of its inclusion under Methods and the HRH journal’s instructions for authors that footnotes to text should not be used.

8. With regard to manuscript formatting, as per the instructions for authors, the current tables 1-3 should be imbedded within the main document text file. It would be more useful to have the larger list of 33 references itemized in an additional file (see point 1). The purpose of including Table 3 needs to be ascertained within the scope of the clarification of the nature/objective of the paper (i.e. not particularly relevant if the focus of the paper is aligned with the results of a literature review).

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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.