Reviewer's report

Title: Asking the Right Questions: Scoping Studies in the Commissioning of Research on the Organisation and Delivery of Health Services

Version: 1 Date: 19 November 2007

Reviewer: Tara Lamont

Reviewer's report:

General
This is an interesting and well-written paper, based on experience of commissioning research for a major funding programme. I think it is useful to consider scoping studies as outputs in their own right and to throw some critical light on their purpose and impact. In particular, I think this paper adds value by describing the different components of a typical scoping report (pp 12-15) - literature, conceptual and policy mapping plus stakeholder consultation - with some useful definitions and methodological framework for others to use.

However, I was expecting to see more analytical reflection on lessons learned. Some particular points are given below, under discretionary revisions. I felt the piece was at times heavier on descriptive narrative (especially pp 7-11) than analytic insight. What were the difficulties or limitations of scoping studies commissioned by the authors (for instance, in some of the very broad areas such as the public health system)? What are the risks? One possible risk in terms of research in general I would have thought would be that policy-makers might look to a 'quick fix' of a scoping study as a substitute for empirical/longer-term research, rather than a first-stage or complement.

I wonder too if scoping studies could be helpful in areas where it is difficult to commission research. The process of scoping could be a way of engaging researchers in understanding the problem and defining research questions - and even producing commissioning briefs. In some of these new areas, it will need to be a collaborative effort.

Overall, I would like to see greater emphasis on a critical commentary by the authors on their experience and what this adds. I think it is helpful to think of scoping studies as legitimate stand-alone products and to use their valuable experience at the SDO to consider when and how scoping studies can add value to health policy and research.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of
Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1 Criteria

In introductory or concluding sections, would be useful to draw out the criteria for commissioning a scoping paper. This is hinted at on p 18 (particularly useful for dispersed and vulnerable groups) - I would expand to consider neglected or undeveloped areas (eg end of life care) or new fields (E-health), where there may be an absence of hard evidence. Another criterion buried in the narrative appears to be an area with `contested definitions and methods of evaluation' (p8) - again, this needs further discussion.

2 Stakeholder consultations

I think this is possibly under-sold. In new or neglected fields, I think the importance of engaging with users is invaluable for these kinds of scoping studies. The paper could tease out the differences between engaging with users to generate new ideas/research priorities as opposed to testing out or validating material at the end of the process. These differences are discussed in the literature in for example Entwistle V et al (BMJ; 316: 463-66). Given that the SDO is a new way of commissioning research to answer the needs of the NHS, I think this component should be given greater emphasis.

What next?: Accept after discretionary revisions

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.