Reviewer's report

Title: Is peer review useful in assessing research proposals in Indigenous health? A case study

Version: 1 Date: 17 September 2008

Reviewer number: 2

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The irony of engaging in an academic peer review process of an article that challenges this process is not lost on the reviewer!

Overall the article is well written, and addresses an interesting question. While sufficient information about the participants and methods is given I would have liked more detail about the 18 interviewees (e.g. how many were from research funders, researchers, community). This may be given in previous reports / publications and if so, the authors could include a sentence directing the reader to these publications.

When I started reading this article I thought it was about peer review (scientific merit/quality type review) and I was more than half way through the article before I realised it was about the whole process of assessing and funding grant applications. I think it is necessary to have a brief explanation of what the peer review process is (in the manner the phrase is used by the authors). This would also help an international reading audience where readers come from countries that have somewhat different components (for example in NZ specific Maori review is sought from Maori researchers and Maori working in end user sites and community services; and there are explicit 'bonus points' applied to applications that meet high priority areas/have high merit including Maori health.

I also wonder if some of the problems about 'competitiveness' lie in the limited pool of funding which also drive the highly competitive process.

I note there are several words that are very Australian and may need to be replaced to make the meaning obvious for an international audience. The two that struck me were 'peak medical funding bodies' (pg 7 para 2). The use of the word 'peak' is a particularly Australian application of the word. Similarly, the use of the phrase 'service industry' is (in my experience) unusual in relation to the health sector and I wonder if it should be replaced with a more common term.

In the final paper of the introduction the authors state what the research question was - but it seems to me this is the question from the larger project and does not reflect that component of that project that is presented in this paper.

In the methods section it is not clear that the steering committee included people from non-CRCAH organisations and, while this is mentioned in the discussion I think it should be more explicit in the methods section as well. It would also be
useful for the authors to discuss whether saturation was reached in the 18 interviews, or not (and to discuss the implications of this in the Discussion section). I note that the authors talk about 'generalising' the results to the Aboriginal health sector. I am uncomfortable with the use of 'generalisable' as this has specific connotations more usually associated with quantitative research and would prefer the authors discuss their findings in relation to the breadth and depth of opinion, beliefs, ideas about the issue across the sector. To this end, it may be useful for the authors to include some information about the feedback from the steering group (assuming that the majority of the steering group were from non-CRCAH organisations). I think that the authors should also include specific details about the caveats rather than reference the previous publication as knowing the caveats is essential for readers to assess how the findings may reflect (or not) the wider health sector.

In the abstract the authors talk about 'traditional peer review' - I was confused to whether this refereed to 'traditional' in the more commonly used Aboriginal sense. In the opening sentence of the introduction they use "...traditional (academic)...". I think this should also be done in the abstract.

I would also use the term 'oppression' rather than 'repression' (page 5 para 4).

My final comment is in relation to the subheadings in the results section. Do these headings reflect the questions used in the interviews, or are they themes that emerged from the data analysis? It would be useful to make this clear.

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.