Reviewer's report

Title: QUERI and the economics of implementation studies

Version: 1 Date: 11 November 2006

Reviewer: Cam Donaldson

Reviewer's report:

General:
My first general point is that this is quite a ‘dry' article from a health economics perspective; nothing new here at all in that many economists for many years have been saying that we need to wider views than simply cost effectiveness. In fact, that wider view is what economics qua economics would take. Every now and then someone seems to 'discover' this position without reference to the earlier literature. Another observation is that, after starting from saying a wider view is needed, we end up with a narrower one; which is what happened with cost per QALY and is also the case with the method proposed in this article! Thus, the wider view I thought was going to be taken is not developed in the way promised. In paragraph, 2, for example, it is stated that managers must decide whether the benefits of an implementation program justifies the cost. This is the part that is not developed in my view. presumably, the VA is cash limited, like the UK NHS; in which case, what is required is a framework that allows rivals for the resources to be compared with each other, and perhaps even consideration of what might be cut back to allow in something that might require extra resources. This is never done in this paper; all we get is a kind of payback model that, in the end takes quite a narrow (provider) perspective. This deflated me! Business cases are very much the norm in many health care systems (and, although I might be wrong, I would be surprised if they are not so in the US VA). But, still business cases. deflect the decision maker away from the really difficult choices related to how meet need (or improve health) in situations of scarce resources where choices and trade-offs need to be made. I would worry about an analysis form that leaves health out of that equation.

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

Related to the above general points, the issue is never addressed of what would happen if the CEA and the BCA results conflict.
The case studies are very descriptive and do not really get the to the issues raised above or demonstrate in much of a wat the usefulness of BCA.
A wider international literature needs to be referred to; the work of Birch and colleagues criticising CEA and the advances that have taken place in the UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia on the revitalised framework of programme budgeting and marginal analysis.
In the end, a business case is a sensible approach (and one that any organisation should be taking), but what is the wider economic framework within which it sits? It is that wider framework whose development and application will enhance human welfare, but it does not get taken up. Scarcity avoidance rather than scarcity recognition seems to be the order of the day, but that might also apply to QUERI more widely too!

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

There is a rather odd looking italicised sentence on page 5.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsary revisions

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.