Reviewer's report

Title: Rationality versus Reality: The Challenges of Evidence-Based Decision Making For Health Policy Makers

Version: 1 Date: 2 December 2008

Reviewer: John N Lavis

Reviewer's report:

Major compulsory revisions
1. The paper’s main contribution is a review of a cognitive information processing framework (what I’ll call section 3) and cognitively generated decision-making influences (section 4) in the context of a broader question about how we can achieve ‘better health policy decisions’ (sections 1 and 5). I found the review to be a helpful, concise summary of the field. As someone who doesn’t know this literature in detail, however, I can’t assess its quality. I can offer a number of suggestions about how to improve the contribution:

• Clarify what is meant by health policymakers. I took the authors to mean executive / legislative politicians, political staffers and civil servants, particularly given that there are times when the authors mention policymakers and managers (who I took to be those working in clinics, hospitals, insurance companies, etc.). Yet more often than not, the authors seem to be describing a world with a single decision-maker (presumably the ‘top’ policymaker). But as the authors implicitly acknowledge in section 5, most policymaking is a group process. In Westminster parliamentary systems (such as in Canada and the UK) where the executive and legislative branches are combined, this group process typically unfolds around the Cabinet table. In a US-style system, group processes may take place in the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Cabinet. Common to all systems, however, is a vast bureaucracy charged with many of the information-processing tasks to which the authors refer. So is the real target of their review the ‘policy analysts’ feeding information up within the bureaucracy, the person on whose desk the information finally land or the whole machinery of government? Or is the real target what I’ve called ‘managers’? Whatever definition is chosen, the authors will have to contend with the strengths and limitations of employing what seems to be described as a ‘single decision-maker’ model to what are typically considered to be much closer to group processes.

• Clarify that supporting the use of research evidence in policymaking means much more than just informing a choice among policy or programmatic options (which seems to be the exclusive focus of the paper). Policymakers also have to decide which ‘problems’ to pay attention to, which might warrant government action, how to implement agreed upon courses of action, etc. Many different types of research evidence can inform these very different types of decisions. For example, systematic reviews of qualitative studies of stakeholders’ views and experiences can help a great deal with identifying ways to frame a problem that
bring on board different constituencies. So the ‘evidence hierarchies’ to which the authors refer must be specific to the policy questions being asked.

• Revise the ‘policy enhancement strategies’ listed in section 5. While the authors acknowledge that this section addresses the ‘multi-billion dollar question,’ as the ones who posed it they can and should go further to develop an inventory (tentative as it may be) containing mutually exclusive strategies that link directly to their review. The current list mixes strategies that seem to have nothing to do with their review (increase funding for empirical research to support policymaking) with strategies that seem (in their current wording) to subvert democratic processes (replace or augment traditional executive or legislative decision-making processes with ‘Delphi decision making processes’ and develop incentive structures for policy decision makers to help align individual interests with broader policy objectives).

2. Getting to the ‘meat’ of the paper is made quite difficult by the ‘straw person’ argument advanced in the section labeled ‘Discussion’ (what I’ll call section 2). I don’t think that this section is even necessary given the authors can simply frame their paper as a highly constructive effort to bring insights from psychology to the question of how to support policymakers to use research evidence as one input to decision-making (among many). This would mean that they can avoid the many missteps that they currently make when the venture into fields typically addressed with more nuance by other disciplines, and most notably by political science. This would also mean that they can avoid a number of other less significant missteps, such as when they attribute sweeping comments to authors who can’t defend themselves in a timely way (e.g., Lin and colleagues are cited as ‘[assuming] rationality in the decision-making process’), when they call EBM and EBDM a ‘scientific method’ (which I don’t think their advocates purport them to be), and when they enumerate past claims about EBM without engaging substantively in whether the claims are well founded and, more importantly, in whether and how the claims apply to EBDM (or what more people called evidence-informed decision-making in large part to make clear that the EB moniker is highly inappropriate in a context in which research evidence is only one of many legitimate inputs to decision-making).

In summary, I think the authors can make an important contribution to a timely issue by focusing on areas where they bring significant insights and by working through even a provisional list of what these insights could mean for efforts to support the use of research evidence as an input to policymaking.

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.