Reviewer's report

Title: Developing a decision aid to guide public sector health policy decisions: A study protocol

Version: 4 Date: 16 March 2011

Reviewer: Kaelan Moat

Reviewer's report:

1. Major compulsory revisions.

The authors have clearly addressed all points of contention and revised the protocol based on the revisions suggested in the initial report I provided.

2. Minor essential revisions.

The manuscript has one small edit needed on line 125 where the word “to” has been deleted—I think it was meant to be left in.

All other essential revisions have been clearly addressed and the current version of the manuscript has very clearly incorporated the proposed edits.

3. Discretionary revisions.

Thank you for your thoughtful responses to the “flags” I raised regarding some of the more detailed and specific aspects of your methods. I think that you have made it clear that you have thought these issues through on your own, and your decisions are clearly justified.

After reading this protocol for a second time, two things have occurred to me that all of the authors might wish to consider moving forward. First, I think that the rationale and intended outputs of your study have the potential to come across as if you are slightly undermining the abilities of policymakers to consider relevant evidentiary sources (i.e. tacit knowledge, values, etc.) on their own. Many policymakers have either formal training in policy analysis, many years of on the ground experience with policy development processes, or a combination of both of these. Often, it might be the case that those other sources of evidence (values, institutional constraints including the influence of past policies, etc.) would be considered automatically during the process and constitute skills that are intuitively developed—particularly with those policymakers that have years of experience with the process.

Secondly, I appreciate the need to expand upon the SUPPORT Tools conceptually and fill in several of the gaps that exist within them. However, one of the key reasons that underpins their specific focus on research evidence has to do with the awareness that it is often personal values and goals of powerful actors that end up driving the policy process in ways that may (or may not) agree
with what the best available research evidence has to say about a particular set of options. This can be considered “less than ideal”, particularly if dominant values have the potential to harm populations. An example of this would be a conservative government’s values driving a push to introduce for profit hospitals in a provincial health care system despite rather robust evidence to suggest that there are negative implications related to this. Because of this I (personally) believe that the Oxman and Hanney series has chosen to focus solely on research evidence to prevent these types of decisions from happening, and not because they haven’t thought these other things (i.e. incorporation of values and other types of evidence) through or failed to see the need to address them.

**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