Reviewer's report

Title: Net benefits: assessing the effectiveness of clinical networks in Australia through qualitative methods

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Reviewer: Rod Sheaff

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1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?
Yes. The question of what conditions enable health networks function effectively is of enduring and international importance. The authors are not the first to address it but they bring substantial new data and the question they address is important enough to bear (a lot) more discussion and research evidence. That said, the outline of the paper aims and research questions (p.8, last paragraph) is a little thin. One remedy might be to move up to there the two paragraphs the open the section 'Measuring Network Effectiveness' (’Benchmark work by’ (p11) ….’consider network governance’ (p.12)), with (perhaps) a brief reference back when introducing the NSW network members' criteria of network effectiveness.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?
Yes. Longitudinal survey data and multi-source case studies are compared across the networks. As reported the research appears well-designed and conducted. The paper exploits, and relates its findings to, the main relevant research in the Anglophone world. However, at the end of the methods section, a brief description of how the data were analysed and combined, so as to relate them to the research questions, might be added.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?
Yes. The paper compares compares two Australian clinical networks dealing with the organisation and models of care used in the treatment of patients with musculoskeletal problems.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
Yes in regard to reporting. Data deposition does not obviously apply to this kind of paper.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
Generally yes, but with two caveats. Occasionally passing reference is made to the private sector (e.g. pp.16,18). Is there an empirical finding to be reported here about the non-participation of private (corporate? And/or voluntary sector?) providers in the two networks? If so, it would be of wider interest. In that case, it would help non-Australian readers to add a brief note saying how substantial a role the private sector plays in musculoskeletal services so that readers can judge whether non-participation of the private sector much of a problem.

The conclusions are a bit meagre. If the authors take the above point about research questions an obvious remedy would be to add summary answers to the conclusion. The abstract suggests that the focus should be more on findings about Turrini's three levels than on Ferlie's three 'dimensions' (see p.12).

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
   Yes, but 'replacing' (in the first line of the abstract) is just wrong; much of the relevant network literature concerns 'inter-organisational' networks in the sense of networks of hierarchical bureaucracies. 'Supplementing' would be more accurate.

7. Is the writing acceptable?
   Yes, I have only a few trifling comments.
   p.11. What Provan and Milward describe are inter-provider rather than inter-firm networks (the networks included charities and state bodies).
   p.13. 'Stakeholder views … “health network”' - typo, cut?
   p.14 'engaged with'. Could a few words be added to say what this engagement consisted of?

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.