Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Jeffrey Fuller

Reviewer's report:

The paper draws on 36 key informant interviews with managers and stakeholders in two Australian orthopaedic clinical networks in NSW and WA. The interviews formed one stage of a larger study also involving repeat social network analysis and feedback.

A. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?

The purpose of the interviews was posed as being quite broad, that is, to ascertain the perception of network members and stakeholders regarding the key factors relating to network effectiveness and sustainability. This is a topic needing work and from the background section the need to ascertain these views is implied as an early stage in the development of an evaluation framework for measuring network effectiveness. It was not clear to me, however, how this study was moving beyond description, as noted in the background as a limitation of much of the network literature. The authors could be more explicit about this.

B. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

The paper is grounded in the literature related to network theory and network evaluation. The matrix that was used across (1) levels of member, network & community and (2) time of short, medium and long is a good one with intuitive appeal, however it could be more operationally described. For instance, more explicit definition of what constitutes network and community levels could make table 2 more informative. This may also enable the table to be synthesised down to the commonalities & differences across the two networks about what stakeholders deemed as important for evaluation.

There is very little in the methods about participant recruitment (from the 92 & 34 core members), how the interview schedules were developed and how the qualitative data were analysed. There are no data that describe the interviewees beyond that they were the two managers or stakeholders. More detail is needed about these to establish the rigor of the study.

The first two paragraphs in the results section on measuring network effectiveness are not results and would be better placed in the methods section.

C. Are the data sound and well controlled?
In the reporting of what stakeholders saw as effectiveness in the short, medium and long term (pp12-13), it was not clear in the text whether these were being referred to at the community, network or member level. Table 2 has the promise of being a genesis for a useful evaluation matrix (perhaps for future operationalization and testing), however, it could be refined more in this current paper if the similarities and differences in the suggested “indicators” across the two sites were more explicit and hence synthesised more. For example, is the phrase “clinician agreement with MoCs” (NSW) much the same or very different as “acceptance of the recommendations by everyone involved in musculoskeletal care” (WA).

Given that the interview questions in the two schedules did not ask about expected outcomes across timeframes, how did the researchers arrive at these in the analysis, particularly when claiming that more NSW stakeholders held the view that long term effectiveness should be demonstrated in patient outcomes. It could be that this difference is an artefact of the data collection technique rather than a real difference.

D. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

Not clear if the study had ethics approval or what was the processes for recruitment and consent..

E. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

In the main, yes although the discussion section is brief. Given the first sentence of the discussion highlighting the finding about evaluating effectiveness in stages, network role and perception of outputs and achievements, it would be easier for the reader to see these if the results subheadings were similarly labelled. The point about wicked problems, while mentioned in the background, is not dealt with as such in the results and so sticks out as somewhat redundant in the discussion. The conclusion section appears to be rather cursory and would be better framed to reflect back on whether the study has informed the purpose, which was to report on stakeholders views about key factors related to network effectiveness.

F. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

Yes

G. Is the writing acceptable?

The text is clear, but it is not always obvious where the argument is going. Text markers to outline what is to be dealt with in various sections of the paper would help with this.

Overall the paper has potential to make a contribution to the evaluation of organisational networks literature in terms of a stakeholder informed evaluation
matrix across temporal stages. For publication however, the methods need to be more fully described and the argument considerably tightened.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. There is very little in the methods about participants and recruitment (from the 92 & 34 core members), how the interview schedules were developed and how the qualitative data were analysed. More detail is needed about these to establish the rigor of the study.

2. The first two paragraphs in the results section on measuring network effectiveness are not results and would be better placed in the methods section.

3. Given that the interview questions in the two schedules did not ask about expected outcomes across timeframes, how did the researchers arrive at these in the analysis, particularly when claiming that more NSW stakeholders held the view that long term effectiveness should be demonstrated in patient outcomes. It could be that this difference is an artefact of the data collection technique rather than a real difference.

4. Not clear if the study had ethics approval or what was the processes for recruitment and consent.

5. The conclusion section appears to be rather cursory and would be better framed to reflect back on whether the study has informed the purpose, which was to report on stakeholders views about key factors related to network effectiveness.

Minor Essential Revisions

6. More explicit definition of what constitutes network and community levels could make table 2 more informative. This may also enable the table to be synthesised down to the commonalities & differences across the two networks about what stakeholders deemed as important for evaluation.

7. Table 2 has the promise of being a genesis for a useful evaluation matrix (perhaps for future operationalization and testing), however, it could be refined more in this current paper if the similarities and differences in the suggested “indicators” across the two sites were more explicit and hence synthesised more.

8. Given the first sentence of the discussion highlighting the finding about evaluating effectiveness in stages, network role and perception of outputs and achievements, it would be easier for the reader to see these if the results subheadings were similarly labelled.

9. The point about wicked problems, while mentioned in the background, is not dealt with as such in the results and so sticks out as somewhat redundant in the discussion.

10. The text is clear, but it is not always obvious where the argument is going. Text markers to outline what is to be dealt with in various sections of the paper would help with this.

11. The Albert Einstein quote at the start is not a part of the study and so should be removed.
Discretionary Revisions

12. It was not clear to me how this study was moving beyond description, as noted in the background as a limitation of much of the network literature. The authors could be more explicit about this.

13. An international reader would not know what Medicare Locals are, hence an explanation is needed or the use of a more generic understood term.

14. To cut back on words, less detail about the overall study may allow more space to describe this component.

15. Much of the detail about musculoskeletal conditions in paragraph two of the methods section could be cut back to the “bare bones” just to emphasise its importance and its service complexity.

**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