Reviewer’s report

Title: The sustainability of new programs and innovations: A review of methods and findings

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Reviewer: Graham Martin

Reviewer’s report:

This is a useful study which seeks to review the literature on the sustainability of novel healthcare programmes and practices. It is clearly written and provides a clear assessment of existing knowledge, and particularly gaps in knowledge, on the likelihood of, and factors associated with, sustainability in a number of healthcare fields. It also makes some helpful recommendations for future research and the reporting of that research.

Major compulsory revisions

Given this is a systematic review, a little more transparency in relation to some of the aspects of the methods is needed. I would like to know the following:

• How many “individuals who study implementation or sustainability” were asked to share additional articles that had not been found through the search strategy? How many extra articles did this locate?

• Over what publication period was the ‘hand searches’ of key journals in which studies on sustainability had been published conducted?

• Why were the search terms used whole words? Would truncating and adding wildcards (e.g. ‘sustai**’, ‘routini*’, ‘institutionali*’ etc.) not have been more appropriate, so that studies pertaining to ‘sustainment’, ‘routinizing’, ‘how to institutionalize’ etc. would also have been picked up? (Relatedly, this is an international field, and so searching for e.g. ‘routinization’ will have missed studies in British English relating to ‘routinisation’.)

Given this latter flaw in particular, I cannot be certain how comprehensive this review is. This is a shame because otherwise, the methods used are very rigorous.

Minor essential revisions

I think it would be very helpful if the authors were clearer from the start about the range of issues relating to sustainability that they are considering in reviewing the literature. For example, the focus on the proportion of innovations that had been sustained came as something of a surprise to me; from the ‘Background’ and ‘Key considerations’ sections, I had assumed that the paper was only seeking to glean the factors found in the literature to be associated with sustainment. This can be very easily addressed, for example through a clear list of questions to be addressed in one of the early sections of the paper.
Discretionary revisions

In figure 2, would it not make more sense to present levels of sustainability in the order ‘partial, low, full’ rather than ‘low, partial, full’?

Although once disaggregated in this way, the numbers are quite small and so inferences should be cautious, there are some interesting contrasts between the factors identified as being associated with sustainment in the three fields covered. These are touched on in the ‘Discussion’ section but might also be covered more explicitly in the ‘Results’ section.

The authors acknowledge to some extent that definitions of sustainability will need to be flexible in order to be appropriate to the range of programmes, protocols, interventions, approaches etc. at different levels of practice that might be sustained. They also mention (though perhaps slightly belatedly) in the ‘Discussion’ section that sustainability may not equate to fidelity to the innovation as originally envisaged, as there may be need for ongoing adaptation. I would be minded to make these points more explicitly earlier on in the paper, acknowledging that attempts to positivistically define sustainment are contentious, and sustainability is not something that can be viewed as a binary state.

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.