Reviewer’s report

Title: How collaborative are quality improvement collaboratives? A qualitative study in stroke care

Version: 2

Date: 18 October 2013

Reviewer: Sue Latter

Reviewer’s report:

Major compulsory revisions

Overall, the paper as currently presented is not sufficiently coherent and/or lacks specificity in parts. Aside from the difficulty distinguishing between the deductive/inductive derivation of the findings, I found it difficult to follow with any degree of specificity the link between collective action concepts outlined in the Background, through the findings and then Discussion and Conclusion. The concepts are also insufficiently separated and distinguished in the Findings and Discussion.

The aim of the study needs to be clearly stated in the Abstract and the text.

There is reference to a pressing need for research into the factors that interfere with the success of QICs, and there is no literature reviewed on what we already know about this, so I assume there is nothing known?

In light of this, the benefit of using concepts from the collective action literature (actually inter-organisational literature, which does seem a logical focus within this) is also unclear – why was a more inductive approach not taken to understanding QIC processes if there is no research on QIC barriers already? Is this because QICs resemble collective action more than they resemble other implementation initiatives? Or is the aim to understand QICs as a form of collective action – if so, returning to how the findings are similar or different to other forms of collective action in the Discussion is needed.

Although the analysis details refer to an inductive approach using Framework Analysis, the link between this and the authors’ statement that ‘These empirically derived themes were then analysed using a set of key sensitizing concepts we had identified in the literature on collective action discussed above, thus enabling iterative category identification, characterisation, and refinement’ needs further clarification and justification. Were these previously identified concepts the best fit for the themes? Were there any divergent ones, or competing explanations? All this is not clear, and there are some doubts about this in the Findings (see below).

If the aim of the study was to study processes occurring in a QIC, why were interviews left until 1 year after the QIC? Or is this paper reporting selected findings from a larger study?
Only 11 of 24 hospitals took part; 32 participants were interviewed –was the number of interviewees influenced by availability or was data saturation reached?

Unless the aim of the study is explicitly stated as being about understanding barriers only and not positive aspects influencing QIC success, then the positive aspects identified in the findings also need to go in the abstract.

There are only two headers or theme / category labels in the findings and so it makes it difficult to link these to the concepts identified from the community participation literature as referred to in the Background and Discussion. Some are easier to link than others –where for example is collaborative inertia in the findings? This is compounded by the lack of distinction between issues in the findings section –for example, we have:

‘The QIC was valued for how it created a sense of a greater purpose, and enabled people to look out as well as in. Many participants welcomed the opportunity both to share and to learn’.

This contains several different issues and these are not sufficiently separated in the text that follows.

And:

‘The effort required to collaborate and the risk of collaborative inertia

We found some evidence, albeit limited, of free-riding and social-loafing….’

If the data on this was ‘limited’ why is this being reported? Additionally, from my reading of the collective action concepts in the Background, the concept of free-riding and social loafing are not the same as the collaborative inertia overarching theme that it has been given here. Does free-riding lead to collaborative inertia?

Competitiveness and internal context and team work - did these really come through as important findings? The links needs to be made clearer.

Overall I think the reader needs a stronger justification for the application of the pre-determined concepts from collective action literature, in addition to a more fine-grained analysis and follow through into Discussion and Conclusion.

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