Reviewer's report

Title: Public preferences for engagement in Health Technology Assessment decision-making: protocol of a mixed methods study

Version: 3 Date: 9 March 2015

Reviewer: Pascale Lehoux

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This protocol describes a study that is original because it asks to members of the public when and how they think the public should be involved in HTA.

The study will contribute new knowledge by applying a mixed method approach that has not, to my knowledge, been already used in this field.

Three limitations could have been addressed:

1) Many public involvement initiatives in HTA have been implemented and assessed in the past decade, including many that gathered participants' views. The protocol could have built more extensively on what is known, especially with respect to the characteristics of the procedure being implemented (issue, process and expected impact). In its current form, the protocol puts a strong emphasis on the characteristics of the decision-making process that follows HTA (as opposed to the content of the HTA itself). Tapping on what is known already may have led the investigators to begin with a series on in-depth interviews before defining the structure of their focus groups (2h to discuss 4 technologies + prioritize criteria will be challenging).

2) The protocol does not seem to address the fact that the way an HTA agency may wish to engage the public is also a function of its mission and of the types of partnership it seeks to build and maintain. In other words, organizational characteristics are likely to affect when and how members of the public would be approached by such agencies.

3) The protocol is strongly anchored in the notion that public engagement is about gathering the "social values" that should guide decision-making. This is a strong assumption that needs to be analyzed in light of both the patient involvement literature and the social scientific work on public understanding of science. I've challenged elsewhere this "demarcationist view" that tends to dismiss the expertise/knowledge of participants as well as the values held by experts. Members of the public need to be engaged for what they know and for what they value, which doesn’t mean that decisions should necessarily follow what the public wants.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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