Reviewer's report

Title: Allocation of Home Care Services by Municipalities in Norway: A Document Analysis

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Reviewer: Charlene Harrington

Reviewer's report:

This paper addresses an important managerial issue in terms of the equitable allocation of home care services by municipalities in Norway. The study methodology was sound, well documented and clearly described. The selection of two municipalities was reasonable and the collection of allocation decisions was large enough to analyze.

The major gap in the paper was a lack of analysis of each municipalities' description of the clients and their specific needs. Did the municipalities have a specific assessment form that was filled out to indicate the client needs or did the records just have a general description of client needs. Did the staff document the client needs for specific activities of daily living (e.g. bathing, dressing, transferring, ambulating) or instrumental activities of daily living (such as shopping, financial management, social needs)? Did the assessments or records indicate the level of help needed for each activity? The client might be characterized as independent in certain activities, or needing cuing to carry out specific activities, needing moderate help of one person, or needing extensive help of one or two people to carry out the activity. The level of help needed for each activity would determine the amount of time required to help carry out each activity. Did the staff take into consideration informal help from caregivers? Are the client assessments and decisions by staff made with the client only do they involve the family and informal caregivers?

I think the study should include a detailed analysis of each municipality's assessment and documentation of client needs before the study examines the allocation decisions. While some clients may have been allocated 10 hours and others were allocated two hours, there is no way to determine the accuracy of the allocation decisions without comparing the decisions to the documented needs of the clients. If the staff are not documenting the specific client needs with times allocated for help, then it is difficult for clients to challenge the allocation decisions or for researchers or auditors to determine the accuracy of the allocation decisions. This seems like the first research question and findings that the researchers should examine. If there is no uniform assessment system, perhaps a recommendation should be made that municipalities should use a uniform assessment form and process for determining the client need for services. Either this fundamental issue needs to be added to the study or it should be added to the limitations of the paper.
Some specific suggestions:

The word "individual" decisions would be better described as "allocation" decisions.

Sample. In terms of the 833 decisions examined, in each municipality, were these for all the individuals that were currently receiving services or did it include those who had previously received services and had completed services? In the findings section, the authors state that some decisions were made initially in 2004 and some had expired. You need to add a clearer description to the selection of decisions examined to page 9 in the methods section to show that you looked at decisions over time and not just those made in December 2012.

Analysis. In the analysis section, a short explanation should be added about the approach to analyzing the distances traveled by staff to each sector. The section should also explain how the duration of services was examined.

Findings. First, all figures and tables should have a label to say what they are showing.

On Table 2, it would be good to add a category that compares all (total) service hours for each municipality and to see if those are significantly different.

In terms of the variations in allocations shown on Table 2, the problem is, as discussed above, there is no way to know if these allocation differences are due to variations in client needs or due to variations in allocation decisions made by staff in the municipalities.

On Figure 1, I do not understand what the decisions 1, 2, and 3 mean? The figures need labels and to be self-explanatory.

Figure 2 is very difficult to read because you have 7 categories and its not clear if they are overlapping categories or not. Either some of the categories should be collapsed or it should be made into two separate figures. You should clarify the points that you want to able show with the figure.

Figures 3-5 are nice but I am not sure what they mean. Maybe it would be better to just have one figure with the combined hours by sector by municipality.

In terms of the issue of the duration of services, in the US, most home care programs require a formal reassessment of clients and allocation of services on an annual basis. If this practice were
adopted in the municipalities, it would address the problem of the poor documentation and the length of service issue. The current methodology used by municipalities assumes no changes over time and leads to inaccuracies in the allocation and delivery of services.

On the issue of support services, maybe these types of services should be studied by researchers to determine what services are needed and given and whether they effective. This would to give more guidance to municipalities.

Overall this is a useful and valuable paper.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

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I am able to assess the statistics

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