Reviewer's report

Title: Perceptions and experiences of Emergency Department staff during the implementation of the Four-Hour Rule/National Emergency Access Target Policy in Australia: A qualitative social dynamic perspective

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Reviewer: Francesca Brundisini

Reviewer's report:

Overview

Thank you for the opportunity to review this explorative study on the impact of the implementation of the 4HR/NEAT policy on ED staff in Australia.

The authors provide background information that sufficiently informs the readers about the 4HR/NEAT policy. They clearly state the objectives of the study and identify the knowledge gap that this study aims to address. That is, this study contributes to the evaluation of the 4HR/NEAT policy regarding the socio-psychological impacts of the policy on ED staff providing novel insights into the consequences of implementing this policy at the individual level.

The paper is well written and organized with the use of headings. The description of the methodological approach is published in a recent paper and shows rigor and attention to the research process, even though I have some minor suggestions for improvement (see section below).

I appreciated the use of figures and tables as they provide additional information and clarification of both the theoretical model and the study's results. I particularly liked Table 1 as it provides a snapshot of the results in one place, as well as Figure 1 as it outlines how the theoretical framework (diffusion of innovations) was adapted in this study.

General comments for the authors

Background: The authors clearly state the aim of the study and the goals of the research. However, the authors should elaborate on why this study is relevant and for who, i.e. who is the intended audience of this study?

Methods - In this paper the authors refer to a recent publication for the illustration of the methodological approach. However, neither study provides information about the following aspects:

- The authors explain that their study and approach to data collection and analysis was informed by the Diffusion of Innovation theory. However, why did the authors choose this...
theoretical framework? And, why and how did the authors adapt it? Figure 1 does provide some insights into this, but it would be helpful if the authors explained this in the study.

- It is unclear how the theoretical framework of the Diffusion of Innovations was applied in this study and in particular for the analysis of the data. The authors do mention that they developed a conceptual framework. However, as outlined in both this manuscript and the published methodological paper, the authors inductively developed the conceptual framework from the data. So how did the Diffusion of Innovation framework inform this study and the data analysis process? I would elaborate further on how the framework was implemented and at what analytical stage the authors used this framework (in the "Data Analysis" section on page 4).

- Why did the authors adopt an approach that combined both content and thematic analysis? In other words, how did the authors select the research design? I do think that the selection of these approaches is appropriate considering the explorative nature of the study. However, I would explain this choice in more detail in the methods section.

Results - The results are mostly clear and nicely organized. However, there are some minor issues to consider:

- In the introductory paragraph of the "Results" section, the authors outline how these results are in accordance with the Diffusion of Innovation theory, however not all the findings are presented as such (intended/unintended & desired/undesired consequences) in the following paragraphs. Some of the results are described as anticipated/unanticipated & desired/undesired, while others are not. I would try to make the description of the findings consistent across all the sections by adding this missing information (see for example, at page 6, first paragraph, the authors do not outline whether the finding "workload increase" was anticipated or not, as the authors already did in Table 1).

Discussion

- I appreciated how the authors clearly outlined the strengths of the study, such as the unanticipated consequence of the policy and its 'unidimensional nature.' However, I expected to find more discussion about the relationship between the percentages of the participants per finding and the thematic analysis (there was only one instance of this, see the end of page 17 and beginning of page 18), and the meaning behind these findings.

- Considering that the 4HR/NEAT policy was introduced after the Four-Hour target policy in the UK, it would be interesting if the authors compared (if possible) the results of this study with those of studies conducted in the UK.

- Finally, at times the discussion section appeared to be more a summary of the results rather than a discussion. I expected, for example, the authors to discuss the relevance of the findings in the implementation of the 4HR/NEAT policy within the WoHA system approach.
Conclusion

- It would be helpful if the authors could offer some practical examples of how policy-generated changes in inter-group dynamics may have effects on future health care.

Detailed and minor comments

On page 3, line 13 - please add the references related to the series of manuscripts that report the results of this same project as this is part I of this series.

On page 17 - it is unclear what is meant by "social milieu" in this context.

On page 18 - the authors use a heading for "limitations." If they add a section with the study limitations I recommend adding also the strengths of this study, in another paragraph, or in the same one under a single heading "Strengths and limitations".

Figure 1 - While the Figure does help the reader understand the classification of the unintended consequences (I really appreciated the colour-coding), I do not understand whether "goals," "serendipities," "classic unintended consequences" and "trade-offs" apply to each level or not - as the 2nd and 3rd levels are not visible. Consider an alternative visual representation of this classification.

Figure 2, 3, 4 - the labels are not readable and blurry (I also downloaded the figures separately, they were slightly better but still the font size too small). And even though the figures clearly show the mind-mapping process, I would consider alternative illustrations of the findings.

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.

Unable to assess

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

Yes
Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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