Reviewer's report

Title: Handling healthcare workforce planning with care: where do we stand?

Version: 1 Date: 23 December 2014

Reviewer: Kaspar Wyss

Reviewer's report:

The manuscript focuses on a very interesting and relevant topic. Congratulations for addressing a highly challenging topic through a scientific paper.

Before we focus on major compulsory revisions, one general consideration:

• The manuscript contains a substantial amount of information and is structured along two distinct topics. The authors should consider splitting the present version into two manuscripts, one providing a summary on major approaches to estimate HRH requirements and a second one focusing on the history of HR planning. In doing so the current version of the manuscript would gain in specificity and precision. Both topics have the potential for publication as not much literature does exist on each of them. Overall: less would be more.

Major compulsory revisions:

• The manuscript has to be reviewed by a native English speaker (in several instances the language is bumpy)

• The structure of the manuscript has to be improved and be aligned to standards as prevailing for scientific manuscripts. Besides the general consideration listed above on the too ambitious scope of the paper, it should be structured along an introduction, methods, results (possibly combined with the discussion) and the conclusions. Currently there is a forth and back starting with an introduction section, followed by the methods and going back to a background section. Further, the current discussion section is not providing much added value and it should be considered to integrate this section in the previous chapters.

• Section 1.2 on the scope has to be merged with the introduction as well as the background section

• The results have to be better linked to the literature review methodology. While chapter 1.1. presents a special way for a systematic review (very unusual) the subsequent chapters do not refer to the search method and their results. Thus the result/discussion section should more explicitly refer to methods used by the review.

• Hardly any reference is made to the level of the HRH planning. Does the manuscript refer to country, regional or local planning or to the HRH planning for specific institutions such as hospitals. Please be here more explicit along the whole of the manuscript.

• Similarly please be more specific if you refer to HRH planning for the whole
health work-force or for specific cadres such as doctors (indeed much of the manuscript seems to refer doctors with very few references to nurses, mid-wives, public health workers, laboratory technicians, etc.). The manuscript refers only in few instances on skill mixes. Either indicate this as a limit of the manuscript or be more explicit about methods for estimating skill mix patterns and different options selected by different countries.

• Please consider to further break down table 4 on data requirements thereby referring more explicitly on different type of data requirements (epidemiological, demographic, health workforce, etc.)

Minor compulsory revisions:
• HHR standing for Healthcare Human Resources is not a standard term. Typically the term HRH – human resource for health - is used
• The manuscript would benefit if more country reference is made. Currently the text only refers very occasionally to specific countries such as the Soviet Union or Taiwan
• On page 2 it is indicated “the methodologies followed by countries vary significantly“. Would be good to refer here (and possibly in other places) that many countries do not have a pro-active HRH planning
• On page 5 in chapter 2.1. it is stated “… medical practice is usually acquired through ex-tensive academic learning … “. What about nurses and other staff cadres who typically do not undergo a university/academic training. Please correct here
• Section 2.1.1 is entitled “methodologies”. We refer here to methodologies for what?
• The second paragraph on page 9 (paragraph 2 in chapter 3) does not well specify what exactly was done in the period of the “conception of an universal healthcare system ..”. What is a consultant medical care (page 11 first paragraph). Never read about this
• On page 11 the manuscript abruptly refers to “head-count approaches” while previously not referring to this approach
• On page 15/16 it is stated “Significant results have been attained”. Significant results in what terms? Please be more explicit here
• Chapter 4.1. refers to an integrated approach. Please provide here or earlier an explicit definition of what the reader has to understand by an integrated approach
• In Table 3 please consider to refer to the WHO document “Increasing access to health workers in remote and rural areas through improved retention” rather than the Chopa paper. The WHO review was based on a systematic review and refers a broad range of possible measures for addressing imbalances

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

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests