Reviewer's report

Title: The impact of physician-nurse task-shifting in primary care on the course of disease: a systematic review

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Reviewer: Grant R Martsolf

Reviewer's report:

This paper provides a systematic review related to impact of physician-nurse task shifting on the course of chronic conditions in primary care. Many experts believe that growing demand for primary care services will soon outstrip primary care supply. One approach to address supply shortages is by supplementing the primary care physician supply with nurse practitioners. This is a very important topic, and it is laudable that the authors attempted to answer this important question. I do have a number of comments that I hope will make this a stronger manuscript.

Major Compulsory Revision

1. My largest overarching concern is that there is not a strong conceptual framework guiding the systematic review. I believe that there are two ways that nurses might supplement the supply of PCPs. First, NPs might function as direct substitutes. Performing similar functions as physicians, managing their own patient panels and in every way functioning in a similar capacity. Second, physicians and NPs can work together as a team wherein PCPs and NPs split duties across a shared patient panel. PCPs for example might manage all complicated cases and NPs more routine cases. I initially thought that the authors were trying to address the latter, but the statement on line 117 where studies were excluded “studies of supplementation” and then the rest of the findings seemed to suggest the latter. The article would benefit from a detailed conceptual framework and definition of the concept of “task shifting” that the authors are attempting to examine. If the authors are referring to the latter concept, the authors should address:
   a. What are the various working relationships that PCPs and NPs can have?
   b. What types of tasks might be shifted from PCPs to NPs?
   c. How might these tasks be shifted?

Once these questions are addressed in a conceptual framework, the authors could then track their findings to this model instead of simply by condition. If the authors, are not referring to this latter concept, they need to be much clearer about what they are trying to examine.

2. I am concerned that the authors limited the studies to randomized controlled trials. There are a number of different types of observational studies that provide very important information if well-designed.
3. I am confused about what the authors mean by “nurse-led” care in line 114 and throughout. This relates to #1 above again.

Minor Essential Revisions

4. It is not clear in the background (and to a lesser extent throughout) what kind of “nurses” (NPs, RNs, LPNs) the authors are referring to. That is clarified more in the methods but this needs to be presented in the background. Basically, what is really the phenomenon that the authors are trying to examine, which is directly related to comment #1.

5. In the results section, the authors need to be much more specific about what kind of nurses are delivering care.

6. Much of the discussion section is not tied directly to the results of the study. I can sort of infer why the authors are making certain conclusions but they need to be more explicit. The authors cite much previous literature but do not actually mention many of the specific results from the reviewed studies that would support their conclusion, particularly in lines 295-308.

7. I do not understand the first few sentences of the conclusion at all. It almost seems to be a non-sequitur from the rest of the paper as it starts in by talking about the role of patients in achieving quality of care and then talk about “non-pharmacological” interventions which I think is the first time this concept is introduced. The authors then state that this is why nurses can play an important role in patient care. Are the authors making the argument that nurses tend to use non-pharmacological and patient-centered care? If so, that was a poorly developed in that paragraph.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

No conflicts