Reviewer’s report

Title: Managing intra-EU mobility - do WHO principles of ethical recruitment have relevance?

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Reviewer: Patricia Pittman

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I believe this is an important topic, but there are several problems with the manuscript. First, the English is awkward and vague. Second, there is a poor understanding of qualitative methods, and the voice of the author is continually confused with the voice of the participants. Third, there is an assumption that the participants are monolithic in their views. Finally, the results are written in a sweeping manner that makes it difficult to understand specific findings or their implications. Examples follow:

Abstract:

"Implementation practices summarized during the Joint Action showed the positive effects on health systems of adhering to the Code..." This design can't "show effects." At most it could report on what different social group believe is the effect.

Background:

The authors write in 1st paragraph: "Two reporting cycles have passed, 7 with significant improvements..." What kind of improvements? What is the evidence? Similarly, they affirm that a review concluded that the Code remains "highly relevant" but give no detail on what is meant by that or evidence of the statement.

2nd paragraph: Similarly, they affirm that it is difficult to measure the mobility of health professionals, yet say its magnitude has been studies. They write that "significant changes in mobility patterns" have occurred, but do not say what those are. They affirm that "destination and source countries experience positive and negative effects" but do not explain what they are.

3rd paragraph: What are the largest destination and source countries in Europe? How do they know that changes in mobility and changes in recruitment policies are a result of the WHO Code? What do they mean by "there is evidence that professionals might perform tasks below their skill level"? Where might there be "deepening inequalities in access to health services"?

4th paragraph: The first sentence seems to imply that making "mobility transparent" will automatically "mitigate the negative effects of free movement..." Is there any evidence for this claim? How do they mitigate the negative effects of migration while "addressing the ethical recruitment of health professionals"?
5th paragraph: What are "good implementation practices relating to the Code"? What is situation that "is beneficial for both countries and the individual"?

6th paragraph: "the aim of this article is to review health systems in light of the Code…". What is the unit of analysis? The national health system? The laws? The policies? The practices?

Methods

How many focus groups with how many participants each? Are these really focus groups per the technical definition, eg at least two for each category of participants and no more that 6-8 participants in each?

What were the points of contrast in these focus groups? Did all groups say the same thing?

How many individuals were interviewed? What were the major area of inquiry in the semi structured interview guide? What do the authors mean by interview guides that are complied on the basis of "pre-defined statements?" Whose statements? Was this used in the interviews to elicit responses?

Results:

There are some interesting component pieces here, including the last sentence of section 1, which lists actual retention policies, although unfortunately there is no discussion of who says they are doing what, or what perceived results they have achieved with these policies. The overall problem, however, is the sweeping phrases that make it difficult to understand the richness of the findings. For example, sentences tend to begin with "Experts supported…." Or "Experts regarded…" which leave this reviewer feeling that these are superficial statements that obscure the nuance of findings.

Moreover, it is often difficult to tell where the voice of the authors and the voice of the study participants begin and end. For example, the second paragraph in section 3 begins " It is especially difficult to estimate the added value of bilateral agreements promoting circular mobility…" Is this a finding or a commentary?

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