Reviewer’s report

Title: The impact of the health care workforce on under-five mortality in rural China

Version: 2 Date: 17 Jan 2019

Reviewer: Jenny Liu

Reviewer's report:

Compared to the first version of this paper submitted, this manuscript has dramatically improved in both theoretical and statistical rigor. In addition, the rhetorical presentation of the hypotheses, results, and their implications are more directly linked and specific. I appreciate the authors' diligence in making the revisions to the manuscript. Below are some areas where additional revisions may be considered:

* Title and framing of statistical approach: While you have tempered your claims of causation, the title is somewhat misleading as it still refers to your results as estimates of "impact." Similarly, the claims in the last sentence in your abstract are quite strong. If you are going to make such strong claims about your findings, then I suggest you reframe your statistical approach to directly state that you are trying to make a causal estimate. I agree that there are quasi-experimental methods that can be used to justifiably claim estimates of "impact." However, the way in which you have currently described and defended your statistical approach does not explicitly say that this is the type of approach that you are attempting to do, and thus produce estimates of "impact." If you want to make this claim, I recommend that you revise the presentation of your statistical results so as to clearly lay out what your quasi-experimental setup is. As written currently, a reader needs to infer this, which may be difficult for readers without more advance statistical knowledge.

* The description of the reforms in China in the introduction provide better context for the paper and motivating the central hypothesis. However, it seems to be added as an afterthought, leaving the reading of the introduction somewhat disjointed. I suggest you review the presentation of the information in your background for logic and flow.

* Should you include references for your data sources?

* How our public health "doctors" different from "physicians"? Unclear why different words are used for a specific intention.

* What does "poverty type" mean?

* What are "headcount allocation policies?"
A close copy-editing of the paper is still needed. There are many places where the wording is awkward, incomplete, or imprecise.

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An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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