Reviewer's report

Title: Plan, Recruit, Retain: A Framework for Local Health Care Organizations to Achieve a Stable Remote Rural Workforce

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Reviewer: Herlinde Wynendaele

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript. Your findings are interesting and the article is well written. Here are some suggestions for improvement. I hope these will help you move this paper forward.

ABSTRACT
1) Background: you jump from the focus on recruiting and retaining to health service models and health needs. The transition to the "purpose of this paper" and the framework could be better.
2) Method:
   - be more specific/give more details; e.g. "five-country" which five (now you would think it is only in Europe -> " [...] funded by the European Union"
   - what do you mean with "established research evidence"? Did you do a literature review? If so, which kind?
   - What other practical experience was there (apart from the case studies)?
   - seven-year? A lot of periods are mentioned in the paper (2011-2019; 2011-2014; etc.) None of them are 7 years?
3) Conclusion
   - " [...] in order to gain recruitment and/or retention improvements" -> did you look at certain outcomes to make this statement?
   - How about recommendations for future research, since the goal of this paper was to develop the framework and not to test is.

INTRODUCTION

- "Factors influencing the decision to stay in or leave a rural job include financial and economic considerations (such as remuneration and other benefits), professional and organizational issues (including professional development opportunities, workload and infrastructure), social factors (including employment and educational opportunities for other family members) and the characteristics of the local community itself (4-7)." -> Are all these factors mentioned in every publication? If not, state the specific reference with the specific factor
- "Particularly, there is very little evidence showing the effectiveness of any specific retention intervention" -> if there is (very little) evidence, can you add a reference?

METHOD
a) setting:
- "However, it became clear early on that the seven-step model was not sufficiently developed to be useful in practical settings" -> Why not?
- During the project period the partnership further refined the seven-step model and developed the broader Framework with nine strategic elements and five conditions for success."
So this seven-step model served as the basis for the framework? Can you give more details on the evolution of this transition? (For example in table 1 the framework is used; but if I understand correctly, the seven-step model was the basis for these case studies)?
b) methodology:
- "[...] design a similar evaluation process to measure and compare outcomes." -> In the end, did you look at certain outcomes?
- "Table 1 gives an overview of the case studies in each country." -> can you give more details on the design of the case study?
- [...] and validate the relevance of the different aspects of the Framework -> How did you do this validation?
c) Flexibility
- This entire paragraph seems out of place. This is not the methodology of this study, but how the instrument can be used.
- "However, it is not a recipe that needs to be followed precisely or in any particular sequence, to achieve results." -> strong statement. What results are you talking about?

RESULTS
- "The Framework describes the necessary elements of an overall strategy to ensure the recruitment and retention of the right professionals to provide needed services in rural and remote locations." Strong statement at the beginning of your result section. "necessary elements of an overall strategy" "possible to implement selected components"
- "The ultimate purpose is to support the health and quality of life of people living in rural and remote communities, through improved access to high quality services." Not necessary to give (again) information about the purpose in the result section
- I think the introductory paragraph should be about the elaboration of the processing of the results; e.g. The results of the different case studies were integrated, but not all case studies have been able to provide input for every aspect of the framework.
- Underpinnings: Is this based on literature? If so, you did not mention this in the methodology section + references are missing
- Five conditions for success: a) this is not mentioned in the methodology section. b) Is there a link with the 7-step model? c) "An annual cycle of key recruitment and retention activities must be identified and undertaken" Recruit and Retain, but not plan?
- Lay-out of Table 1 could be better

DISCUSSION
- This section needs more depth. e.g.: comparison with previous literature? What is the difference (advantage) with the 7-step model? How should the evaluation be done in the future? Do you think the framework can be used outside these 5 countries? How should the different levels (local, regional, etc.) work together? Etc.
- The discussion session has only 2 references?
- Can you add the limitations of your research?
"We need research on outcomes from the use of the Framework in different local contexts."
which outcomes? Different outcomes than those proposed for the 7-step model?

CONCLUSION
- This could be more concise.
- You also added new information without reference (e.g.: "Investing in training of people from rural and remote communities, in rural and remote locations, for rural and remote jobs, leads to more successful recruitment and stability of services in these locations. However, every remote rural community is unique. Active community participation is essential to ensure the success of initiatives that target remote rural communities. Top-down initiatives are doomed to fail.")

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