Reviewer’s report

Title: Overuse in cancer care: Do European studies provide information useful to support policies?

Version: 0 Date: 08 Nov 2017

Reviewer: Deborah Korenstein

Reviewer’s report:

Overall the premise of this paper is to evaluate the extent to which European studies of the quality of cancer care include estimates of overuse. The focus on quality metrics distinguishes it from a study of rates of overuse more broadly, though that distinction should probably be better emphasized. As a general comment, much of the writing is unclear or awkward.

Abstract: The background and methods is generally clear though I'm not sure what the last clause of the first paragraph means ("…, relying on the type of measures adopted in assessing processes of care"). My understanding is that the authors are intentionally looking for literature using quality metrics- if that is correct it should be included in the Abstract. If not, the framework of the paper should be clarified.

Introduction: The introduction is not clearly written, though I understand what the authors are trying to say. The focus on the quality literature should be clarified, since as currently written the purpose of this paper is somewhat unclear.

Methods:

* I like the concept behind Box 1, though it took me a while to understand it. I would recommend keeping this figure but perhaps changing it a bit. For example, the "Rates" and "Question addressed by the rates" cells should be more closely aligned to make clear that the "question" is addressing the specific rate described in the abutting box (perhaps use a dotted line rather than a solid line to separate those cells of the table).

* Identification of relevant studies:
  
  o Why was the search limited to English? Since the purpose was to look for European literature I'm not sure why the authors would limit to English.

  o Please include a sentence about search strategy/terms in the Methods, with more detail in the Appendix (as it is currently).

  o Exclusion criteria are reasonable
The authors do not describe who reviewed articles for inclusion and if this was done in duplicate. I would recommend including such a description.

Data abstraction

The authors do not describe the process of data abstraction (e.g. which specific authors performed it? Was it done in duplicate or was data checked by a second author?). This process should be fully described.

The authors do not mention assessing/recording study design of included studies, though this is reported in the tables. I would recommend describing the fact that study design was abstracted and including operational definitions of the different study types.

Results: Table 1 is quite clear. In Table 2, some of the interventions/procedures are poorly defined and more detail should be added. For example, in the first row (Wockel) the prevalence of overuse of “Axillary dissection” is presented as 12.5%, but the population in whom axillary dissection was considered inappropriate is not included. I would recommend checking throughout this table for clarity of definition of overuse (it is clear sometimes, e.g. for the Kinderlen paper). The text of the Results is brief but adequate.

Discussion:

I disagree with the first sentence defining research of quality of care. This whole sentence is probably not necessary anyway.

In the second paragraph you might want to cite Baxi SS et al. Med Care 2017 Jul. 55(7):723-33

I appreciate the discussion of why overuse is relatively neglected (though its being addressed by nearly 25% of papers strikes me as high not low). The authors say that it is telling that when generic rates are used, they are often used only to address underuse. However, often generic rates only suggest underuse and not overuse, depending on the measure. For example, raw rates of influenza vaccination may vary and lower rates suggest underuse. Because the vaccine is recommended for most patients, higher rates do not suggest overuse. The authors should clarify this point.

The authors should offer suggestions regarding how to make overuse more of a priority for researchers assessing care quality.

The authors should include brief discussion of why there was no increase in overuse measurement over time (despite more emphasis). This is a surprising finding and deserves discussion.
Level of interest
Please indicate how interesting you found the manuscript:

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

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

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