Reviewer’s report

Title: Addressing the affordability of cancer drugs: using deliberative public engagement to inform health policy

Version: 0 Date: 13 Nov 2018

Reviewer: Tania Stafinski

Reviewer’s report:

General comments:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this paper, which describes a set of public engagement activities conducted across Canada to elicit the views of the general public on decision-making around the funding of cancer drugs in Canada. I fully support the need to consider public values during these processes and recognize the lack of solid empirical research done to date in this area. While I found this paper extremely interesting, I'm afraid I would need more information on a few elements before being able to make a fair judgement on the robustness of the results. Also, I would recommended that the manuscript be structured to comply with currently accepted published guidelines for presenting qualitative research (e.g., COREQ).

Specific comments:

1. Page 7 (participant recruitment): This section is clearly written, but it would be helpful to know how many letters of invitation were sent out, whether the final decision on selection of panelists was made by the market research firm or the investigative team, and how that selection was made. Also, I would like to see some information that would help me to know whether the market research panel from which these individuals were picked was representative of the population at large.

2. Page 8: Who comprised the "steering and advisory committees", and what roles did they play?

3. Page 9: It is stated that a cancer patient representative and an oncologist participated in the sessions. While both of these perspectives are critical, I'm not sure they adequately cover the "local decision-making context". Neither are administrators or budget holders responsible for allocating scarce resources. Also, the perspective of the innovator was not included. Previous juries have demonstrated the value that the public places on innovation. Therefore, some rationale for the decision to include some stakeholders' perspectives and not others on the expert witness panels is needed.

4. Page 9 (reference to Appendix 1): I don't see how this Appendix includes "relevant research evidence on the topic of cancer drug funding decisions in Canada".
5. Page 9 (structure of deliberation): More details on "collective deliberation and making recommendations" would be helpful. This section doesn't clearly explain the structure of the process. How did the deliberations begin? And was it identical in all panels?

6. Pages 11 to 16 (Results): No information provided on the 86 recommendations is provided, making it difficult to see how the 6 themes emerged. A description of how they came to be (e.g., if the recommendations, themselves, were seen as sub-themes, etc.) would be helpful. Although "voting" is mentioned in the prior section, there is no mention of whether this happened and what it means for the general agreement on the recommendations or the themes.

Page 11 (Theme 1). Does "strong support for clear criteria" mean unanimous agreement? Did the Quebec panels not have a view on this theme?

Page 12 (reference to Figure 1). The 3 choice scenarios provided in this figure are fairly limited. Choice options of the "all else being equal" kind ask the participants to focus on one dimension only (e.g., length of life). In reality, decision-makers rarely, if ever, face that kind of scenario. They have to make decisions between options that vary on multiple dimensions, and it has been shown that such decisions are usually contingent upon something (i.e., option A may be picked over option B if all else is equal but if there are other factors (values) that are seen to be relevant, the choice may be reversed). This needs to be addressed in the discussion and reflected in the conclusions.

Page 13 (para. 2): 12 months is identified here as a sort of "threshold" for additional survival before a "significant" cost is paid. What was the rationale for selecting 12 months and what does "significant" means with regards to cost?

Page 14 (Fairness and equity): The panels were not asked about what they would give up in order to achieve better fairness and equity. "Opportunity cost" was mentioned earlier in the paper, and what panels were prepared to give up in order to help specific populations would have made the findings all that more relevant and useful to decision-makers. Some discussion around how decision-makers could use the findings in their current form would be helpful.

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