Reviewer's report

Title: Disentangling rhetoric and reality: an international Delphi study of factors and processes that facilitate the successful implementation of decisions to decommission health care services

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Reviewer: Gill Harvey

Reviewer's report:

This is an interesting, well-written paper that tackles a topical issue in health care and implementation science. There are a few areas where I think the paper could be strengthened and improved. At present, the balance of the paper is weighted towards a descriptive account of the Delphi study; with selective use of relevant literature, I think that the analytical contribution of the paper could be enhanced. I would also like to see some additional details relating to methodology and methods. The suggested changes are summarised below.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The discussion section of the paper reads a bit too much like a re-presentation of the main findings. The authors point out that there are parallels between their findings on decommissioning and wider issues of health policy implementation. I would also suggest there is a lot of similarity with the experience of implementing evidence-based healthcare more generally (e.g. via clinical guidelines, research evidence etc.), which the authors could bring into the discussion - particularly around issues such as the contested and situated nature of evidence, the influence of contextual factors at different organizational levels etc. Broadening the discussion in this way would give it a more insightful and analytical edge and increase the relevance of the findings.

2. Some additional details relating to the methods used should be added: firstly, in relation to the sample, information about how the sample was identified and recruited. What was the rationale for delegating someone as an 'expert' in one of the three fields? More detail on this would be helpful, particularly as the sample is heavily weighted to the UK. Secondly, a bit more information on the methods and processes of data analysis. For example, at the top of page 5, the authors state that "consensus was statistically operationalized by testing for polarity"; what does this mean? Similarly, how and by whom was the thematic analysis conducted?

Minor essential revisions

3. There are a number of places in the findings section where more explanation of the findings presented would be helpful:

i. On page 6, the authors state that 463 factors were identified that positively or negatively shape the processes and outcomes of decommissioning. In the
questions to the Delphi panel, these issues were dealt with separately, yet in the results they seem to have been combined together. Is there a reason for this e.g. is it the presence or absence of the same factor that exerts a positive or negative influence on decommissioning?

ii. Also on page 6, the authors comments that the three main themes were "determined by the authors". What does this mean? And do the authors perceive a level of overlap between the themes? For example, change management and implementation strategy could conceivably encompass both of the other themes. Please provide an explanation for how/why these three themes were identified.

iii. In the findings presented in Tables 5 and 6, it appears that respondents identified (9) more factors that do inform decisions than should inform decisions. Is there anything the authors can say about this finding?

Discretionary revisions

4. The final paragraph on page 4 states that participants were asked to consider 'de-implementation' processes and outcomes. Should this read 'decommissioning'?

5. With reference to the text immediately following the reference to Tables 5 and 6 on page 8 - how is this different to the findings in Table 5?

6. In Box 2, the 12 statements with a very high level of consensus seem to be a mix of both statements and best practice recommendations. What is the difference between statement and best practice recommendation? The main text only refers to statements.

7. It would be interesting to see some final reflections relating to the implications of the study findings. The authors hint at this in the concluding paragraph, but I would have liked to see more specifically how they thought their findings might be useful at a policy and practice level.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests