

## Reviewer's report

**Title:** Can learning organisations survive in the newer NHS?

**Version:** 1 **Date:** 19 May 2006

**Reviewer:** Huw O Davies

### Reviewer's report:

This is a nicely-written and quite engaging article that takes a broad look at the extent to which current and recent policy directions are consistent with the development of organisational learning in the NHS. It is presumably meant as a "Debate Article" as it contains no new research, and the collation of observations and arguments is driven by no discernable methodology. For example, the comment (p7) that "this is not an exhaustive list" highlights the major difficulty with the paper "the observations made and arguments developed are necessarily selective, partial and idiosyncratic. This doesn't mean that they are wrong, and it doesn't mean that they are without interest" but it does mean that the piece reads not all that persuasively: a different set of authors tackling the same basic question may have highlighted rather different features and come to perhaps different conclusions. Contributors to this impression are the often broad sweep of the argument (e.g. on leadership) and the rather sparse use of references, even when making some quite strong assertions (many examples of this).

Overall, the piece reads as a polemic against change and (especially) competition, with all arguments being marshaled to bolster the central contention that organisational learning cannot thrive in the current environment ("a candle in the wind", last page). One is left with the impression that this conclusion rather came first and the search for supportive evidence came after. Most fundamentally, positing the NHS as whole as a "learning organization" sets up a straw man that is, of course, relatively easily demolished. Organisational learning needs to take place at many and various "levels" within the NHS and it is not at all clear to me that all the policy shifts the authors cite are necessarily inimical to such developments. Indeed, the paper is often confused as to whether it is assessing organisational learning in the NHS or the NHS as a learning organization. Finally, the concluding remarks on the ubiquity of systemic contradictions just left me rather confused as to quite what the authors' final stance was.

### Major Revisions

The piece needs to be much clearer about what is its level of analysis. The title "Can Learning Organizations survive in the newer NHS?" suggests a focus on operational sub-units, yet much of the argument is at the macro level and aims at demolishing the idea that the whole NHS can be a learning organization.

Assertions ought to be better supported by evidence and reference.

At times the observations made relate more to individual rather than organisational learning (e.g. lack of finance for learning identified by Wanless).

It is not clear that "structural instability" highlighted as a potential inhibitor "or indeed other policy shifts - always reaches down deep enough within health care organizations to disrupt clinical team function" and it is here that collective learning most needs to happen.

Competition is usually cited in much of the OL/LO literature as a driver of improved collective learning "yet this article asserts (p8 and opening sentence of Discussion) only negative consequences of competition.

### Minor Revisions

The description of double-loop learning on page 4 could be clarified to indicate that this type of learning entails setting a different organisational course through re-thinking intended goals and directions.

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

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