

## Reviewer's report

**Title:** The key role of facilitation in the implementation of research findings: a qualitative evaluation of facilitation experiences in the Veterans Health Administration

**Version:** 1 **Date:** 19 June 2006

**Reviewer:** Luciana Ballini

### Reviewer's report:

#### General

Stetler et al's paper addresses an issue which has become of great importance within implementation research, that is establishing a theoretical term of reference for the study and evaluation of the effect of an implementation intervention. In their background discussion they describe very clearly the problems related to the poor operational definition of interventions, the poor understanding of why and how an intervention is thought to work and the subsequent difficulties in evaluating the intervention's effectiveness and its variations.

-----  
Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

The methods proposed is somewhat weak, being based only on retrospective analysis and relying totally on self-reporting interviews. Nevertheless such an approach can be regarded appropriate for an exploratory study that has as prime purposes to raise consciousness about the need to better understand this concept, and thereby enhance its deliberative operationalization, as appropriate; and to encourage explicit evaluation of facilitation in future QUERI research.

Methods are well outlined, with sufficient materials and references provided to allow replication.

Although it would have been useful to have some quantitative data reporting rates of success of the implementation programs referred to in the study and to have them correlated with the rate of success attributed by the interviewees, my main concern lies with the actual interpretation of the role of "facilitator", which is defined in the study, as an implementation intervention.

The role of the external facilitator as described in the paper, and defined by the results of the interviews, seems to me to relate to the role of an external project manager or consultant, rather than an implementation intervention. This impression is further reinforced by the fact that the external facilitator interacts primarily with the internal change agent (or internal quality improvement project manager). The facilitator is described as having a major role in providing methodological support and guidance to the ICA in the various tasks involved in a quality improvement local project, such as the assembling of evidence, the diagnosis of barriers and facilitators, the suggestion of interventions to overcome barriers and the collection and analysis of data to document the outcome of the project in terms of change in clinical practice. This is an important function which different research groups (such as QUERY) have developed and provide to local health organizations. As stated in Table 1, QUERI is an improvement initiative wherein participating researchers are expected to simultaneously study the implementation process and work toward rapid and significant improvements. This suggests that the object under study in this paper is not so much an implementation intervention but the role of researchers or "experts" in supporting local project. I found this reinforced by the descriptions given of the intervention (page 13), of the key components (page 14) and most of all of the barriers (page 18), clearly related to the capacity and possibility of this "external consultant" to be able to be intensively present and interactive.

My opinion is therefore that, while the paper suffers from a misconception of what is meant by implementation intervention, it could be a very interesting piece of research that defines and "operationalise" the role of implementation researchers as people who provide external methodological support while collecting and analysing data on the process of implementation. This would necessarily involve a change of focus. Moreover other issues would need investigating in greater depth, such as on which terms the methodological support is sought by the local health organisations and provided by researchers, how is progressive autonomy of ICA from external facilitators gradually built up and achieved, how possible interference, or fear of interference, in the local management is regulated and how responsibility of success / failure is distributed.

-----  
-----

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

**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.