Reviewer's report

Title: Factors for mid level provider's motivation: the Malawi health workers and district management perspectives

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Reviewer: Amy Hagopian

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Re: Ogenna Manafa, Eilish Mcauliffe, fresier Maseko, Cam Bowie, Malcolm MacLachlan. and charles Normand

Factors for mid level provider's motivation: the Malawi health workers and district management perspectives

Thank you for the opportunity to review the above-referenced paper, which attempts to explore health worker motivation, in particular (it seems) with regard to attitudes towards a government-sponsored compensation enhancement / task shifting scheme.

I had to read the paper carefully a few times to try to derive the motivation and purpose for the study. This needs to be stated much more clearly up, and nearer the front. The scheme the authors are attempting to evaluate was also not well described. The title needs to be revised to better signal the purpose of the paper, as well.

The methods included 3 focus groups of mixed health worker types. Typically, focus group theory advises against this mixing of heterogenous groups. Homogenous gatherings are more likely to generate honest appraisals (nurses being more comfortable speaking with other nurses, rather than in the presence of supervisory personnel). Further, they allow the researcher to make differentiations among the views of different types of providers.

Even if the focus groups had been homogenous, however, I am concerned about basing an entire study on the conduct of three focus groups. That's a pretty thin data set on which to make health policy conclusions. I note 13 key informant interviews were held, as well, but these were not with rank and file health workers, who were ostensibly the focus of this study. The fourth paragraph in the Methods section refers to a survey, but it's unclear whether that is yet a different method than the focus groups and interviews.

The process of focus group text analysis was a little garbled: "A thematic analysis was conducted to identify the key themes arising focusing on issues that were mentioned frequently, received particular emphasis or on issues where there were divergent views."

On page 8, we are told "most managers interviewed believe the working

conditions within their facilities are good," and in the next sentence we are told the managers also "perceive the lack of supplies…in the facilities as a major de-motivating factor…" Aren't these contradictory statements?

Why are job descriptions not written locally for the positions in those facilities (page 9)?

Some terms and concepts need further explanation: locums, locum scheme, inflation, squatter camps. What is wrong with living with families and relatives (page 9)? There must be more to that problem.

The paper needs editing to improve the writing quality and correct grammatical errors.

• Data are, not data is.

• The use of which vs. that.

• The paragraph in "results" at the top of page 8 uses "they" repeatedly without explaining about whom we are talking; in general, the paper uses "they" a lot without good reference to the population described

• The authors mix up the results from health workers and managers

• Acronyms aren't explained: HR, DHMT, MSF, others.

Some of the conclusions at the end of the paper are not based on the evidence gathered. And it's hard to believe that 13 interviews could yield such very specific conclusions, anyway. How were the rankings conducted listed on page 10?

There are places were more specific references are needed--for example, what is the source of the statement: "The chances are that some will migrate in any case: well qualified nurses from developing countries are working as unqualified care assistants in care homes in developed countries where their qualifications are not recognized." In general, the references need some strengthening. For example, JLI is an odd source for the statement: "There are 10 districts without an MOH doctor and 4 districts without any doctor." Since this purports to be a study of mid-levels, the Fitz Mullan article on mid-levels in Africa should have been read and cited, as well.

I am worried about the lack of human subjects approval for this study. I have done similar work (using focus groups to explore health worker attitudes), and my human subjects office required repeated revisions of methods to ensure no threats to the employment status of participating health workers.

One finding in the paper that was most interesting was the existence of an "internal brain drain," that is, health workers leaving government sector jobs for more lucrative positions in the NGO sector. This important issue should have received more attention.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely

related research interests

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

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.