Author's response to reviews

Title: What Counts as Reliable Evidence for Public Health Policy: the Case of Circumcision for Preventing HIV Infection

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Author's response to reviews: see over
We have made the following changes in the manuscript

1. Changed the abstract to conform to the BMC style

Comments by Rebecca Armstrong

1. Request for additional references regarding reviews of what is known about HIV transmission and circumcision

   We have made it clear that the purpose of this paper is not to provide a comprehensive review of what is known about this issue. We nevertheless, have, as suggested by the reviewer, added that we recognize that there are other approaches and reviews, and given a reference to one such.

2. We have modified the reference to the issue of complex interventions and added a reference as suggested by the reviewer

3. We have made the changes in recognize, and the characterization of the Cochrane collaboration

4. Re page 6, paragraph 2. This was stated by the Cochrane reviewers themselves. We have therefore added the appropriate reference

5. We have changed to demonstrates

6. We have defined observational studies

Comments by Stephen Moses

1) We have changed to “recognize”

2) We have made it clear that we meant control for objectively diagnosed STIs

3) We have made it clear that we meant that we are using the data that formed the basis for the Cochrane review, not what is in the current literature, nor any subsequent publications from the trials. The basis for the Cochrane review was 24 month follow up

4) We have added high

5) And 6) We have added qualifications to our statements, and an additional reference

Comments by Susan L. Norris

2) We have changed to text to clear up the confusion between confounding and bias. We have made it clear that in addition to the effect of circumcision on behavior change the two groups may be treated
differently by the study personnel when they provide counseling, and distribution of this difference in counseling among the two groups may be causally relevant for acquiring HIV infection.

3) We have corrected this confusion between circumcision causing behavioral change, versus counseling associated with circumcision causing behavior change.

4) We have corrected the text about selective recruitment of study subjects.

5) We have added references about bias as a result of stopping studies earlier, and made the point that this is also an issue of bias, not just ethics.

Minor revisions

1) We actually mean “efficacy”, i.e. effect that is measured in the context of an RCT, not necessarily the effect that one gets in real life settings.

2) We have corrected the statement about the Cochrane Collaboration.

3) We have changed the text accordingly.

4) We have changed the text accordingly.

5) We have changed to causal.