Reviewer’s report

Title: Easier said than done!: Methodological challenges with conducting maternal death review research in Malawi

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Reviewer: Jody Lori

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Major Compulsory Revisions

Thank you for the opportunity to review the manuscript entitled: Easier said than done!: Methodological challenges with conducting maternal death review research in Malawi.

While this is important information that would be of interest to the readership of BMC: Medical Research Methodology, it needs significant revisions before it is a publishable scholarly article.

Background: There is more current information available on the number of maternal deaths worldwide. The authors cite WHO, 2008. The Trends in Maternal Mortality, published by WHO, UNFPA and others in 2012 should be used.

This sentence needs re-wording. There is misspelling (observations) and the sentence does not make sense. “They conducted participant observations and in-depth interviews with 23 healthcare workers and managers and found out that audit sessions were held only when the head of department of obstetrics and gynaecology was available, participants have inadequate knowledge of the purpose of audits.”

Methods: The methods section needs more detail. Was this a secondary analysis of data collected by another group? The authors state: “The methodology and findings for the study upon which this paper is based have been described in detail elsewhere.” But do not cite a reference for the primary data. It is not clear to the reader at all what methodology was used other than participant observation at 4 audit meetings.

Findings and Discussion: The manuscript is poorly organized. The authors jump from the methods to the findings and discussion, yet they discuss some of the data analysis in the finding section. This should be re-written in a more acceptable style. There is no detail about how the data (and it is not clear what those data looked like) were analyzed.

Data Collection: The data collection section (under findings and discussion) seems to say there was primary data collection involved. Please make this clear for the reader.
Chart review/extraction: Was a standardized form used for chart review? What data was attempted to be retrieved? It would be helpful for the reader to know this. The authors state: “Furthermore there maybe disagreement between data collectors reviewing the same chart (intrarater reliability) or one data collector reviewing the same chart twice (intrarater reliability).” How was this handled?

Again the authors state: “In summary, with the medical record, and more specifically the information documented therein, being poorly maintained and marred with errors, omissions, and idiosyncrasies it has been deemed an unreliable source”. For this study or in general?

Facility Based Interviews: How was informed consent obtained for the interviews? A description of this is needed.

The authors state: “Lastly, in a couple of the cases where the circumstances surrounding the deaths were very controversial some participants actually omitted key information, or gave misleading information.” How do they know this?

“The situation posed a dilemma for us because we had to decide whether to probe until the true accounts of the event were revealed or to respect participants’ rights to decide on what information to divulge. In these instances more than one healthcare worker were interviewed to ensure greater accuracy.” If the authors already knew the answer way were they asking the question?

“…distance travelled from point A to B to C, etc was difficult to determine as well.” Remove etc.

The authors state: “Another related problem was with the recording device itself. At one point it was inoperable so the voice recorders on the mobile phone and laptop computer were used, while the research assistant took as detailed notes as possible. Because most interviews took place outside, there was a lot of background interference. The wind howled frequently so voices were cancelled out. In those instances field and debriefing notes supplemented the transcripts.” This should be under a Limitations Section.

Traditional Birth Attendants: Again the authors make many suppositions: “Based on fear or skepticism our motives, two of the TBAs were not as forthcoming about the degrees to which they assisted the women, e.g. whether they delivered the baby, the placenta, or only gave advice.”

“(or perhaps selective memory)” should be removed.

Language barrier: More detail is required in this section. How were translators identified? Were forms back translated for accuracy? What was the background of the translators used in the field for oral translation?

The authors should tell the reader how many people were interviewed, describing the demographics of the participants to give some context to the results.

Reviewing cases and analyzing data: “The main outcomes of this step are the
medical, or pathophysiologic, causes of death, with their being either direct and indirect;” This sentence is grammatically incorrect.

Causes of death and International Classification of Diseases: This is all interesting information but it needs to be tied to the study. There is no clear link made by the authors. I would delete everything down to the paragraph starting with “The International Classification of Diseases tenth version (ICD-10) was used…” and then talk about the results from this study and not “cases” in general. This only serves to distract the reader.

Synthesizing the findings: If the three delay model is going to be used to synthesize the findings this should be talked about in the methods section and not near the end of the manuscript. When describing the results using this model – give the reader the accurate numbers instead of “some” or “commonest” or “very few”.

Health system perspective: This section can be deleted as well. It does not add value to the manuscript and is not developed enough.

Recommendations: Are the authors making general recommendations or specifically for this institution? Again, the authors refer to other publications with no citations.

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

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**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