Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Sue Fawcus

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The paper was an interesting description of methodological problems encountered during a maternal death enquiry of 32 maternal deaths in a hospital in Malawi.

It was a very small series in which causes of death, avoidable factors and actions were identified for these deaths using the enquiry process. These results are published elsewhere. The current paper focusses on methodological problems encountered at each stage of the audit cycle. The authors describe many challenges which are well known to those performing audit in low resource settings and have been described in a previous audit performed in Malawi by E. Kongnyuy and published in your journal in 2008. The topic is therefore not original. In addition the 2008 paper presents a SWOT analysis which is a much more comprehensive and balanced assessment of the audit process. However the in depth literature review in the paper under review which accompanies the description of problems encountered at each stage of the audit process is particularly informative and relevant for health professionals performing audit in these settings.

However there are several problems with the presentation of material and severe limitations of the recommendations and conclusions which are described below and mean that the paper needs considerable reworking (MAJOR REVISION) before it could be published.

1. Clear Aims and Objectives of this paper are not stated and could potentially be confused with the aim of the primary study of a maternal mortality audit.

2. There is no mention of the Methodology used to evaluate the audit process. The paper provides a descriptive list of problems but does not indicate from what data source these observations were obtained; from record review, from observation at audit meetings etc. Were checklists used to evaluate the process? Also, were any aspects of the process thought to have been useful or have been done well, and / or did the problems described relate to all the cases investigated.

3. The section on Findings and Discussion mixes up the actual descriptive observations of the study with a literature review and discussion. It would be less confusing if the findings and observations are first described and then the literature review is used to expand further on the problems described in
4. The literature cited on each stage of the audit cycle is interesting and informative. In particular the section on ICD 10 codes and classification of cause of death, underlying factors and final cause of death have been issues for the South African Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths and have been partly addressed in the new ICD 10 adaptation by WHO for classification of maternal deaths.

5. If the study aims to review methodological issues associated with the audit cycle, it would be expected that it would be more than a list of problems but present a more balanced list of the components which were valuable as well as those that were problematic.

6. The conclusions and recommendations were disappointing. The conclusion stated was that the first and third delay were the problems that would need to be addressed in order to reduce maternal deaths. However this would be the conclusion of the primary study - the maternal mortality audit. The current study aimed to evaluate methodological issues so its conclusions and recommendations should have been of a different nature. After the detailed description of methodological challenges with supporting literature, it was expected that the authors would provide thoughtful discussion and a critique of the implications of their findings. Do they indicate fundamental and inherent problems with the audit process or do they represent problems for which the challenges can be overcome by specific interventions. If so, what interventions could be suggested to overcome the problems encountered with the audit process. There is literature available which describes more successful audit processes in low resource settings such as Zimbabwe and in some of the documents provided by the MDSR (Maternal Death Surveillance and Response) process of WHO.

In summary, the description of challenges with supporting literature is useful and informative for low resource settings. However it does not add significantly to the other paper published from Malawi which also addressed the challenges of maternal death review. If published, the article needs to be considerably reorganized and reworked. The findings should be used to give more of balance sheet of the audit process and what can be recommended for others to overcome the methodological problems.

**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.

**Declaration of competing interests:**
I declare that I have no competing interests