Reviewer’s report

Title: Uptake of HIV testing and outcomes within a Community-based Therapeutic Care (CTC) programme to treat Severe Acute Malnutrition in Malawi: a descriptive study

Version: 1 Date: 14 November 2007

Reviewer: Mickey Chopra

Reviewer’s report:

Overall this is a well written paper describing a well conducted study that addresses an extremely important issue. My comments are mostly focused on the interpretation of the results.

The first part of the introduction is slightly misleading in that it starts to discuss the use of clinical protocols for diagnosis of HIV. The title, however, is about the uptake of HIV testing and outcomes of HIV positive children. It would be more appropriate for the introduction to set the scene with regards VCT uptake rates in infants and children in these settings and why innovative approaches are required.

With respect to data collection it is not clear whether the clinical assessment and history taking was obtained by one of the 3 trained nurses for both cohorts or just for the PC. There is no mention of whether there were any quality control and standardisation procedures put in place.

The results are well presented though once again the title would suggest more detail around testing uptake - did the rate improve or change over time? Were there any sub-populations that did not take up the test? etc

Even though the authors recognise the serious problem of loss to follow up and survival bias in their RC much of their discussion does not take this into account. In particular the first and sixth paragraphs of the discussion suggest that ARV therapy may not be required for most of these children because of the good recovery rates. I would be extremely cautious in drawing these conclusions based on the limitations of this study.

Finally i would like to have seen more discussion about VCT uptake. Questions arising from the data that are not addressed include whether the very high acceptance rate suggests a degree of coercion? Why is the uptake rate much lower in the guardians? What proportion of HIV positive children do they think they have picked up? Did the HIV positive children suffer any discrimination or further neglect?

What next?: Accept after minor essential 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.