Reviewer's report

Title: Maternal deaths in eastern Indonesia: twenty years and still walking, an ethnographic study

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Reviewer: Zubia Mumtaz

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Reviewer's report: This is a poor manuscript. An ethnographic analysis of 11 maternal deaths in a remote region of Indonesia has the potential to produce a rich body of evidence to answer the question of why, despite over 20 years of active government efforts, Indonesia has failed to reduce its MMR. Unfortunately this paper has failed to meet this potential. It reads like an undergraduate paper. I normally like to suggest ways to improve the manuscript, but in this case I think there is a need for a major revision, starting from re-analyzing the data.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

Not really. Overall, the rationale for the research question is poorly thought out and structured. Rather than focusing on the 3-delays model, a relevant but old idea, it would be better to argue, why despite 20 years of active government interventions to address Indonesia’s high MMR, women continue to die. The authors need to read up on the large body of lit on the Indonesian maternal health program and develop a rationale that goes beyond simplistic statements about factors that affect maternal health services delivery or that skilled birth attendants are needed.

The 3-delays methods has been used to describe the data. I think a better framework to describe this data is one developed by Price (2007).

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

No, there are issues. There is confusion about the exact methodological approach taken. Initially you mention this is an ethnographic study, but later it becomes a phenomenological approach. Can you explain the use of the two terms, and how is this a phenomenological study?

Please provide more details about how the data was collected? How were the group discussions recorded, permission taken etc. Were any observation notes.
How long did data collection last?

What was the role of the Australian researchers in data collection? Where do they come from, issues with language, were they involved in questioning or were they silent observers. How trained were the local researchers in qualitative data collection?

Please provide more details about the manner win which the data were analyzed...how were the codes developed, what methods were used to extract themes. Was a qualitative data analysis package used.

Was the research team invited by the local church leader to come and explore the high maternal death rates, or did the researchers request the help of the leaders. Unclear, but important distinction.

Overall, the methods section reads like an epidemiological study...not a ethnographic study.

3. Are the data sound?
Possibly yes, but given the issues with the analysis, I am not sure.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
There are huge issues with the way the data is analyzed. The fact that there are 7 themes is problematic. In a manuscript there should be 2-3 themes. The fact that there are so many categories suggests that data needs to be analyzed to a higher level of abstraction.

Moreover, each of the categories ( I will not call them themes) are poorly titled ...when is a single word ‘poverty’ a theme? Each category is poorly described and more often than not the quotes don't support the main argument being made.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
Again no. The discussion section contains results. It fails to locate the results in the literature

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
No

Level of interest: An article with potentially large interest for people working in global maternal health.

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publications unless edited. Words like 'distressingly tenacious' and 'evocatively' look odd in a academic manuscript.

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
Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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