Reviewer's report

Title: The difficulties of conducting maternal death reviews in Malawi

Version: 2 Date: 20 June 2008

Reviewer: Ana Pilar Betrán

Reviewer’s report:

The manuscript presents the results from the SWOT exercise in conducting maternal deaths reviews in nine hospitals in Malawi during 2006. It is clearly written and it reads well.

This manuscript is important because in the context of achieving MDG number 5 and reducing maternal mortality it presents qualitative evidence of barriers and useful steps towards addressing some issues that preclude maternal mortality reduction locally.

Discretionary revisions:

Authors argue very reasonable that the solutions found in this SWOT exercise in Malawi could be relevant in other countries. I think a brief description of the characteristics of the nine hospitals would help the reader to place this SWOT exercise more in context (eg. urban, rural, type of hospital, type of population in the catchment area, etc) and also would help to understand better the results. This could be presented in the Methods section.

The authors explain in the introduction that the maternal death review was introduced in 2006 in the nine hospitals but an assessment revealed that only one hospital actually used the Forms provided by the Ministry of Health. On the other hand, in Results, in Strengths (page 5) it is stated that participants agreed that the Forms had greatly facilitated the review process. Maybe the authors could explain what it seems a bit inconsistent.

I wonder if the SWOT workshop was preceded by some quantitative analysis that could be shown in the manuscript. For example, authors rightly point out (Results, in Weaknesses page 5) that missing information and poor record keeping makes these reviews and their recommendations flawed and irrelevant. Did they evaluate the proportion of records with missing information or the proportion of non-existing records?

The results of the analysis are framed in a general manner such us "involving men and community leaders was emphasized" or "hospitals were encouraged to ensure proper stock inventory". This is good and interesting but I wonder if participants came up with any list of concrete actions (even if minimal) to undertake back to their respective hospitals/district offices in order not to go back to "business as usual" routine. Maybe the workshop did not contemplate this.
Minor essential revisions:

Page 6, para 3, the sentence "Law suits for poor management are now increasing in developing countries" deserves a reference to back up the statement.

The manuscript has some typos as presented below and I would suggest some careful reading in case there are more.

Page 3, para 3, line 12: it should say: "Under these circumstances..." not "Under this circumstances..."

Page 3, para 3, line 13: it should say: "...review is seen as a means..." not "...review is seen a means..."

Page 6, para 2, line 6: it should say: "The providers..." not "They providers..."

Page 9, Reference number 1: it should say: "Maternal mortality in 2005..." not "Maternal mortality in 2050...".

**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.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interest.