Reviewer's report

Title: HIV Prevention for South African Youth: Systematic Review of the Evidence for 'What Works'

Version: 2 Date: 2 November 2009

Reviewer: Thomas Rehle

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This is a well written review which should clearly be published. I have only minor comments – which the authors may feel free to ignore.

The title led me to expect that this review would provide evidence for what has worked to reduce HIV incidence among South African youth. However, the manuscript concludes with the statement “no interventions have yet demonstrated a reduction in HIV incidence”. The title should reflect this key outcome of the review.

Stepping Stones applied the most rigorous and convincing evaluation design, including HIV incidence as primary outcome measure. The impact of the intervention on HIV incidence is not mentioned but deserves some discussion (was study adequately powered?); also Table 1 should include the impact on HIV.

The authors recommend that “third generation” youth interventions must ensure more rigorous evaluation designs, including HIV incidence. I fully agree with that. However, determining whether observed changes in HIV incidence are a reflection of the natural history of the epidemic or due to intervention effects remains a vexing task. This is particularly true when evaluating behavior changes in the face of a maturing epidemic with evidence that secular trends towards risk reduction is likely occurring in both intervention and control groups. Furthermore, in a situation in which multiple implementers are conducting multiple interventions with overlapping target groups, the effects of individual projects cannot easily be sorted out. At some point, we need to stop worrying about attributable impact measurements in such settings and focus on monitoring the changes as they occur.

Page 13, first paragraph, 3rd line: ..in other promising interventions [ ]
Add reference(s).

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.