Reviewer's report

Title: 'Relief of oppression': An organizing principle for researchers' obligations to participants in observational studies in the developing world

Version: 1 Date: 12 March 2010

Reviewer: Vural Ozdemir

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Exploitation in international research, particularly in developing countries, is a topic of great concern and importance, for both conceptual and applied public health research. In the literature, this term is often (mis)used without adequate attention to its conceptual contents, or occasionally one reads polarized narratives on exploitation that are very narrowly framed or underdeveloped conceptually.

It is against this background in the present state of medical literature that this paper makes a timely contribution, and as appropriately stated by the authors, provides an essential "bridge" between a narrow, transaction-oriented account of avoiding exploitation and a broad account emphasizing obligations of reparation for historic injustices. The analogy and references drawing on the "harm reduction model" is particularly suitable to develop the organizing principle of "relief of oppression". The discussion in the paper will offer practical and pragmatic guidelines to researchers engaged in observational studies in low and middle income countries (LMICs). This is notable because there are virtually no or very little practical guidelines in the context of evaluation of exploitation for long term observational studies. In the absence of such guidance in the literature, we, researchers, and the general public, are left with a vacuum and superficial debates in the media that are non-informative or with arguments that scratch only the surface of a more complex and nuanced issue. The discussion in the paper is therefore timely, and makes an important contribution to global health research for observational studies.

The paper is well-written and was easy to read. References include past work for both sides of the argument (for/against) and hence, are balanced.

The following revisions might improve the paper:

1. As a concept, "relief of oppression" will populate the "barren middle ground" in the "menu" of principles and concepts to evaluate the researchers' responsibilities and benefit sharing in long term observational studies. This point can be emphasized further - that there is a need for a range/menu of principles to evaluate the benefit sharing and the responsibilities of researchers in a context of global health.

2. One or two other potential (but brief) examples of the conceivable application
contexts (e.g., other than for STD observational studies) for the relief of oppression principle can help guide future research and applications of this principle.

3. The authors correctly suggest that sometimes well-meaning activist attempts can do more harm than good, when there are no practical guidelines to evaluate exploitation (e.g., when sex workers abruptly quit work in the absence of a long term safe employment alternative, creating a vacuum that is not sustainable). This point can be emphasized further.

4. LMIC abbreviation is not defined early in the text (low and middle income countries).

5. In the acknowledgements there is a typographical error ". We are grateful to , , and ..."

6. Spelling of the "moreso" in the text should be "more so.."

**Level of interest:** An article of outstanding merit and interest 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 interests