Reviewer's report

Title: What works in meeting the health needs of Scheduled Tribes in India? A systematic review of the literature

Version: 2 Date: 2 February 2010

Reviewer: Nikki Clelland

Reviewer's report:

There is no doubt of the need to further develop a sound evidence base of effective public health interventions for vulnerable population groups. This is an important area of work and the findings would contribute to improved policy and service delivery for Scheduled Tribes in India.

Major Compulsory Revisions

• I would like to see the authors provide a concise, clearly-focused review question or aim that takes into account the population group, type of interventions and outcomes considered.

• I would like to see the authors provide a more detailed account of the data collection and analysis methods used. For example,

a. Why the choice of databases? Given the limited number of studies, why wasn’t a review of the grey/unpublished literature considered?

b. I would also like more detail in the search strategy so it could be replicated

c. Furthermore, more detail of how the authors assessed the quality of the studies - was an existing instrument or appraisal tool used? (eg. CASP or Schema for evaluating evidence on public health interventions); further description of the inclusion/exclusion criteria eg. how was a ‘major flaw in design or methodology’ (p6) determined?

d. please describe the role each author played in critiquing the studies / drawing conclusions.

Minor Essential Revisions

• I would like to see the authors include a brief account of any Scheduled Tribe involvement in the review, for example through ST researchers or community engagement. I would hope that there has been ST involvement, particularly in interpreting the findings and making recommendations as this would add to the validity of the conclusions and recommendations in the paper. The authors’ have also emphasised the importance participatory research approaches in their review (a criteria on which studies were assessed p10-11) and in their conclusion (p13-14).

• Following on from this, I would like to see more information on the importance of ethical considerations and participatory approaches when working with vulnerable groups included in the background.
• The authors need to check how they arrived at the final number of studies included in the review p6. (397 – 376 = 21)

Discretionary Revisions

• I would like the authors to consider reviewing similar work from other vulnerable population groups eg Aboriginal &/or Indigenous populations groups. Are there comparisons that can be made – do these strengthen the conclusions or highlight important differences?

• This work is a first step and I encourage the authors to continue and further build on it.

**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