Reviewer’s report

Title: Non Prescribed Sale of Antibiotics in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: A Cross Sectional Study

Version: 1 Date: 8 June 2011

Reviewer: Pauline Norris

Reviewer’s report:

This is an interesting study about an important topic. Sales of antibiotics without prescription from pharmacies are common throughout the world, particularly in developing countries, and it is important to document this and explore the reasons for it. I have structured this review around the questions suggested.

Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
Yes

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
The methods are appropriate. More description is required though. (major compulsory revision)
How common is it for pharmacy customers to buy products on behalf of family members? This is important in assessing how plausible the simulated patients would have been to the pharmacy staff. Were the simulated patients women or men? In some countries it would be much more common for women to seek help on behalf of men, but I understand that in Saudi Arabia it may be the other way round.
Were the staff who sold the antibiotics pharmacists or assistants? Was it possible for the simulated patients to know?
How much information was provided by the simulated customers, and how much was given only on request? Did the patients ask any questions or did they take a passive role in the interactions? Did the patients use any medical jargon, or did they deliberately use lay language and ways of describing problems?
I am a bit confused about the levels of demand. Were these used sequentially, ie, if one didn’t result in an antibiotic being sold, the next one was used, etc. Or were different levels of demand assigned to different interactions?
Are the data sound?
Yes, they appear to be

Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
Yes

Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by
the data?
Yes. It would be useful for readers to know about whether and how the regulations prohibiting non-prescription sale of antibiotics are enforced in Saudi Arabia. The authors’ suggestions about how to improve this enforcement would be useful.

Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
No, there is no section describing the limitations of the work. This needs to be included (compulsory revision). The limitations in my opinion include the use of doctors and medical students as simulated patients. It is likely that the pharmacy staff noticed the class and medical expertise of the patients, and may have provided less counselling because of this. Obviously the staff’s actions in selling antibiotics without prescription and without appropriate counselling is still completely inappropriate, but in terms of the generalizability of the study it would be useful to have used simulated patients who were not health professionals.

Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
Yes, but I think it would be useful to refer to other studies that have used simulated patients in a community pharmacy setting, because this is quite a well-established methodology. A review of this methodology is provided in Watson M, Norris P, Granas A. A systematic review of the use of simulated patients and pharmacy practice research. International Journal of Pharmacy Practice, (2006) 14: 283-93.

Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Yes

Is the writing acceptable?
The use of English could be improved somewhat. The Implications section is very good, but could be shortened and revised to make it clearer and easier for readers to follow.
Dispensing should be dispensing, and dispensed should be dispensed (minor essential revision).

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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