Reviewer's report

Title: Long term virological, immunological and mortality outcomes in a cohort of HIV-infected female sex workers treated with highly active antiretroviral therapy in Africa

Version: 3 Date: 13 January 2011

Reviewer: Brian Montague

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for your follow-up. I think that this paper documents an interesting and relevant example of a care program targeting to reach a hard-to-reach population of sex workers in a research limited setting. Similar models have been developed in resource plentiful settings however the effort documented here is relatively unique in that it shows that such programs can be reproduced if adequate resources are available in a resource limited setting in a highly endemic area. For that reason, I do think the publication would be of sufficient interest to warrant publishing.

The chief problem with their work remains in their description of the significance of the work. The cite it as a possible means of impacting transmission in the community but they fail to satisfactorily address in their discussion the scalability of this project, leaving instead a disclaimer that it may impact transmission and it may not be reproducible outside of a sponsored program such as what they document here.

The challenge for this program is similar to that faced by a wide variety of programs implemented with outside sponsorship in resource-limited settings. When study sponsorship ends, the patients cared for under these programs are absorbed into national programs who are faced with providing care to large numbers of people without sufficient resources. The decision to continue intensive case management programs such as the one posed here is balanced against providing basic access to treatment for the many who do not receive even basic care services and these programs become difficult to justify. The heart of the debate the authors raise is whether the impact on transmission possible through targeting a potentially highly transmitting group of infected individuals counterbalances from a public health point of view the benefit of extending treatment to others who are out of care but whose behavior makes their likelihood of transmitting the disease to others less significant. In addition to the public health considerations, balancing these brings up significant ethical considerations as well which are relevant to consider as well.

If these issues are not clearly addressed by the authors in the article itself, I would suggest that consideration be given to publishing it with an accompanying editorial outlining the above concerns. I would be happy to contribute that if the editorial staff thinks it would be a useful addition.
I appreciate the opportunity to review this article and please let me know if I can contribute further.