Reviewer's report

Title: A literature review of the disruptive effects of user fee exemption policies on health systems

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Reviewer: Marie-Gloriose Ingabire

Reviewer's report:

This article is summarizing the findings from 23 scientific articles on user fee exemption in Africa as they relate to the six health systems building blocks and provides indications of research gaps.

As the authors clearly state, the intent of this article is not to be a comprehensive review or a critique of methodological approaches but to highlight the disruptive impact of the user fee exemption policies on the health systems in low and middle income countries (LMICs). This article, as the authors also mentioned (and provided the web link), repeats and summarizes the content of a background paper (in French) from the same authors published by WHO in 2010.

The article recommends a systemic approach to the evaluation of user fee removal policies given their system-wide impact touching on each of the building blocks and their interrelations.

I commend the authors for the discussion section which reconfirm the need for a system-thinking approach when implementing and assessing the user fee removal policies.

However, there is a couple of revisions:

A. Minor Essential Revisions
1. On page 8 under 6-Leadership and governance, the second sentence should read “…various actors in the system had not been adequately informed.” or “…various actors in the system had been inadequately informed”
2. Table 2 should be better formatted

B. Major Compulsory Revisions:
1. The question/topic and methodology are very clear and well stated. However, the methodology used is limited to few papers and should capture the most recent published articles on the topic.
   - In effect, this article should state its focus on studies conducted on/in some African countries only and not on/in LMICs in general as mentioned.
   - In addition, there are recent articles such as “User fee removal in low-income countries: sharing knowledge to support managed implementation” that discuss the same issue. This article is by Bruno Meessen (one of this article’s co-authors), Lucy Gilson and Abdelmajid Tibouti and it was accepted in
September 2011 and published in Health Policy and Planning.

2. Comparative to the above-mentioned article on impact of user fee exemptions, the only change from this article is to have the key findings organized under the six building blocks of the health systems. However, as the authors rightly discussed in the article, a systemic approach should be recommended and used, not the building block in silo.

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**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