Reviewer's report

Title: Attitudes towards Mental Illness in Malawi: A cross sectional survey.

Version: 1 Date: 14 January 2012

Reviewer: Ilse Blignault

Reviewer's report:

This is a potentially interesting manuscript that describes attitudes towards mental illness in Malawi, a country in sub-Saharan Africa about which there has been little published in the mental health field. Data were gathered via a cross-sectional survey of patients and carers attending various outpatient clinics at a tertiary teaching hospital in the second largest city in Malawi.

Major compulsory revisions

As it stands, however, there are a number of major problems.

• The methods are unclear – are the data from researcher-administered interview, a self-report questionnaire completed by patients or their carers, or both? It is also not clear how the measure of stigmatising beliefs used in analysis was derived – the sums of all or some of the questionnaire items? Reporting a power calculation seems to make little sense since this is not an intervention study. The sample size of 210 (132 patients and 78 carers) is more than sufficient for a descriptive study like this.

• The results are poorly presented, especially Figures 1-3. I would prefer such data presented in a table, possibly with two columns – one for those attending the psychiatric and epilepsy clinics and one for those attending the other clinics. In the text, percentages are preferable to phrases such as “a reasonably equal distribution”. I would also prefer to see the breakdown by source (psychiatric/epilepsy clinic vs. other clinics and patients vs. carers) before the breakdown by demographics and other personal data (gender, education etc).

• The discussion would be better separated from the results, possible starting with the last paragraph on page 8. (Page numbering does help.) This whole section seems overly long with much unnecessary material. For example, the second sentence in that paragraph could be deleted and nothing would be lost. In the discussion of limitations there was only one that I could see – lack of generalisability of the results to the general population, or other sub-populations, given the selected sample.

• A major conceptual problem throughout (from abstract onwards) is the interchangeable use of “spirit possession” with “spiritual causes”.

Minor essential revisions

There are also a number of minor problems.

• Inconsistent use of hyphens, e.g. sub-Saharan, cross-sectional.
• The term “subjects” seems a little old-fashioned; “participants” would be better.

• The persons accompanying the relative in the waiting room are variously, and confusingly, described as “relatives”, “carers” and “guardians”.

The title is short and suitable informative but the body of the text could be considerable tightened. A good edit would pick up “counter part” on page 8 and "Attitide” on the veritcal axis in Figure 3 aswell as other linguistic and typographical errors.

**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.