Reviewer's report

Title: Treatment actions and treatment failure: case studies in the response to severe childhood malaria in Mali

Version: 1 Date: 23 July 2012

Reviewer: Helen J Smith

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General comments

This is a comprehensive and well conducted study of household response to childhood malaria in a region of Mali with high prevalence of malaria. The findings seem to concur with previous research conducted elsewhere in SSA; the particular contribution of this study is that it provides the perspective of households in a French speaking country in West Africa. The question is clearly defined, the methods appropriate, and the paper is well written. The authors outline clearly how their findings relate to the wider literature on childhood malaria. There are just a few revisions and clarifications required, as detailed below.

Major compulsory revisions

1. The study was conducted more than 5 years ago (2006-7); could the authors comment, in the discussion or limitations section, on any likely impact of this on the current relevance of the findings? For instance, is it possible that available care seeking options, household responses, or costs associated with care seeking have changed over this time period?

2. A strength of the research approach is that it involves household members involved in the illness episode and not just the primary caregiver. However, it is not entirely clear how the discrete treatment steps were identified from these various data sources. Were there any inconsistencies between the mothers account and the other household member’s accounts of the illness episode? And if so, how did the authors reconcile these differences to then identify the true account and actual treatment steps? Perhaps the authors could add an explanation in the methods section.

3. Content analysis is employed to analyse the qualitative data, but it is not clear how the questionnaire data are dealt with. Some data is presented as simple counts and percentages and other data as direct quotes – were there two strands to the analysis process and is the numerical data from the questionnaire, or the interviews? For both sets of data it would be helpful to explain the process in a bit more detail – ie how were the main themes/areas covered in the findings identified, and how were the percentages derived?

4. Top of page 9 there is an incomplete sentence, “By the third step, only 14% of children n=3)....”
5. In the findings, page 10, there is a section on signs of severity and convulsions – but there is no ‘data’ used to support any of the statements made in this section. I presume there could be direct quotes from interviews which could provide illustrative examples?


7. The discussion is based on the study findings and there is a balance between presentation of the main findings and consideration of the findings in the context of existing research. However, the first part of the discussion is missing a section that summarises the main findings. Currently the authors begin by summarising other research when actually the reader first needs a concise summary of what the present study found. Adding this short paragraph will help the consistency of the paper overall.

8. In the limitations section the authors refer to the retrospective study design, and how the inclusion criteria minimised ‘overall bias’, which seems vague. Surely the main concern was ‘recall bias’, unless there were other specific threats to validity that the authors were concerned about?

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**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