Author's response to reviews

Title: "Preventing the preventable through effective surveillance: the case of diphtheria in a rural district of Maharashtra, India."

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Author's response to reviews: see over
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To,
The Editor in Chief
BMC Public Health

Sub: Submission of manuscript for publication

Dear Sir,

We wish to submit the attached manuscript entitled “Preventing the preventable through effective surveillance: the case of diphtheria in a rural district of Maharashtra, India.” for consideration for publication in your esteemed journal as an original article.

Epidemic diphtheria is still poorly understood and continues to challenge both developing and developed countries. Despite availability of the resources including an effective vaccine for over 2 decades multiple foci of the disease persist in over 12 of the 29 states of India. Further, vaccine coverage is poor in a majority of the states and weak surveillance compounded with absent case based reporting makes monitoring of the disease difficult. There is a heightened risk of re-emergence of diphtheria in epidemic forms in rural India.

In September 2011, an outbreak of diphtheria occurred in Maharashtra, a western state of India. We conducted an onsite survey to assess this outbreak and the response mounted to it to further the understanding of the epidemiology of the disease in the state and hence the country. Our findings suggest a shift in the median age of disease to adolescents and cases and deaths in previously immunized individuals- in line with the trends shown in the other 12 states. Adult booster immunization which is a widely accepted policy in the high income countries is not a strategy in India despite availability of the resources. This calls for an urgent review and update of the immunization strategy. We also observed drug resistance in our study which raises serious concerns management of the disease in the future.

Other low and middle income countries like India face similar problems. Although, practitioners and policy makers in these countries tend to deny diphtheria a priority spot given the existence of other significant health and health system concerns and the existence of an effective vaccine. Nonetheless it is time to stand up and nip the bud in time before it overcomes the health capabilities of resource poor countries. Practitioners in low and middle income countries have to be alerted to be vigilant for the disease and the emerging drug resistance if any. The paper aims to serve as a reminder to public health practitioners of the existing problems and emerging threats in management of the diphtheria. Past experiences...
have demonstrated that preventing epidemic diphtheria can be very challenging especially in current times where global travel is a matter of hours.

We are eager to publish this manuscript with *BMC Public Health* because we identify with the core values of the journal- open access and minimal emphasis on interest driven research against need based research. Further we also appreciate the journals vision of focusing on complex interrelations between “social determinants of health and disease” alongside the outcomes of health policies, practices and interventions on the community” as a whole.

Although the study may seem localized and one point in time experience the lessons learned apply largely to the country as well as address the issues faced by other countries which justifies the objective of our work.

We certify that all authors have participated sufficiently in the intellectual content, conception and design of this work or the analysis and interpretation of the data (when applicable), as well as the writing of the manuscript, to take public responsibility for it and have agreed to have their names listed as a contributors. We believe the manuscript represents valid and original work. Neither this manuscript nor one with substantially similar content under our authorship has been published or is being considered for publication elsewhere. We declare that there are no possible conflicts of interest, sources of financial support, corporate involvement or patent holdings for each of the authors.

The study was part of the doctoral dissertation of Ms. Revati Phalkey which is due for submission on June 28, 2012. Therefore we would like to request a fast track processing of the manuscript so that the paper if accepted can contribute towards her doctoral degree.

Thank you for considering our manuscript and we look forward to your response.

Yours’ sincerely,

Ms Revati Phalkey
(On behalf of all contributors)