Reviewer's report

Title: "You are wasting our drugs": Health Service Barriers to HIV Treatment for Sex Workers in Zimbabwe

Version: 2 Date: 26 May 2013

Reviewer: Simon Gregson

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Major Compulsory Revisions

The issue addressed is extremely important and interesting and, in general, the paper is quite well written. However, the new findings from the analysis, as presented currently, are rather limited. I think this might be addressed largely by incorporating some of the information given in the Introductory sections (Study Design and Study Setting) and possibly from the Discussion into the main body of the paper (Objectives/Methods/Results). For example, the findings from the initial review of medical records in 2010 and from the analysis of attendance at first referral appointment and at follow-up visits are interesting and appear to be unpublished so could perhaps be included as part of this paper? Also, perhaps, direct observations on nurses attitudes from the follow-up training programme (currently in the Discussion)?

The rationale (including basis for originality) and objectives of the paper need to be stated more coherently and link more clearly to the actual content of the paper. From the final sentence in Study Design, I understand that the objective of this paper is to use data on barriers and facilitators to engagement with care to identify measures to increase uptake and adherence amongst sex workers. The Results describes supply and demand side barriers (rather little on facilitators) and the Discussion describes two particular follow-up initiatives. However, it is not really spelt out how the results of the study were used in developing the new initiatives.

Abstract – the abstract is rather unbalanced. More detail needs to be added in the Methods (e.g. where the study was conducted; how the data were analysed and interpreted etc.) and the Results, and the Background and Conclusion sections could be shortened (perhaps all in line with the suggestion above). The Conclusion needs to follow more closely from the Results.

Minor Essential Revisions

HIV treatment for sex workers, second paragraph: ‘sex workers experience the same barriers to accessing HIV treatment …’ - can you clarify same as who? As other SWs or as women or people in general?

Study setting, third paragraph – it would be helpful to have more information on the assisted referral system used here.
Methods, first paragraph – a few more details of the FGDs need to be reported. e.g. any tools used (topic guide?), where and when held etc. Was there a focus at any point in the FGDs on the assisted referral system itself? Details of the barriers (and facilitators?) identified from the literature (and, in Results, new ones emerging from the specific study/context).

Consent from participants – this appears to be repetition.

Results – can you include a few summary details of the FGD participants? e.g. age-range, types of sex work activity, type of treatment facility visited, numbers with different levels of experience of engagement with treatment services etc. Rather than the study reference and FGD numbers, it would be more informative for readers if (for example) the ages and level of engagement with treatment services could be given for each quote. e.g. as evidence to support the authors’ point that women with different levels of engagement expressed the same views etc.

Results, paragraph starting ‘Concerns about being identified as a sex worker were exacerbated by use of referral forms provided at the SWV clinic’ – this seems to suggest that aspects of the assisted referral system turned out to be counter-productive? It would be interesting to know what participants thought of the programme as a whole and whether the programme procedures have been reviewed in the light of these findings?

Discussion, first paragraph – reference is made to the existence of targeted and ‘sex worker friendly’ services. As suggested earlier, it could be useful to describe the assisted referral system and SW’s perceptions of its features further. Beyond the referral system though (which might need some re-thinking), it is not clear that the services at the time of the study were in any sense ‘sex worker friendly’ – rather the reverse?

Discussion – again, a stronger case needs to be made for how this particular study has added to understanding on how adherence to treatment services amongst SWs can be increased

Discussion, fifth paragraph – the findings from the training programme for nurses appear to corroborate those from the sex workers themselves. Could this material be used in the paper itself (Methods/Results) to strengthen the evidence on barriers and facilitators to SW uptake of treatment? Or at least, be stated as providing corroboration in the Discussion. In the Discussion itself, it would seem more useful to explain more fully (and in a more tightly linked way) how the findings of the study informed the design of the new elements of the SWV programme.

Discretionary Revisions

Acknowledgement – I think it’s unusual to include authors in the acknowledgements!
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