Reviewer’s report

Title: The best in the world? A study on key actors maintaining elders in functional autonomy in Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso)

Version: 1 Date: 10 March 2014

Reviewer: Kay Price

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for this opportunity. I think there are some significant issues that need attention to improve the manuscript.

1. Is the question posed original, important and well defined?

No specific research question is posed by the authors. In the acknowledgments the authors thank the appropriate body for use of PRISMA-7 and the SMAF. There is no mention of the use of the PRISMA-7 in the manuscript under review. Why make such an acknowledgement if it was not used? The answer would seem to be because the authors acknowledge that the manuscript is part of a ‘larger project study on family support for older people with functional disability’. Yet, there is no mention, or reference to refer to, as to how this study reported in the manuscript under review is located in the larger study – this needs to be made clearer. As I read the manuscript it reads as though findings from the larger study are informing what is being written in it without stating this. I assume this may be because of the use of PRISMA-7 in the larger study. As it is described in peer reviewed literature, PRISMA-7 is to be used before using SMAF. The PRISMA-7 is used as a case-finding tool to identify older people with potential moderate to severe disabilities (Hebert et al., 2003). The authors need to make clear what has occurred. Also, given what has been published in peer reviewed literature about the role of family and community supports to meet care needs of older people living in the community, it is surprising that this manuscript does not refer to this literature – for the international audience who read this journal, this is needed. This is also significant given the objective of this study was stated as ‘to identify the key actors of the social system who maintain elders in functional autonomy while describing the functional status of older people’. Referring to what supports are available in other countries would seem to be important to strengthen their conclusions.

2. Are the data sound and well controlled?

In literature I have read related to the use of the SMAF – those who designed this instrument clearly state that participating subjects are assessed at home with the SMAF ‘being administered by a health professional (nurse or social worker) who scores the subject after obtaining the Information, either by questioning the subject and proxies, or by observing and even testing the subject.’ The argument the original designers present is that ‘the rater must score the individual's actual performance (what he does), not his potential (what he could or should be able to
do).’ (Hebert et al., 2001) There is a lack of clarity in the manuscript under review as to where, how and by whom the SMAF was administered. More attention to this detail is needed given that the original designers of SMAF have argued for a skilled health professional who can actually assess a person’s capacity by observing what he/she does and then estimate available resources to compensate for any identified disability. I acknowledge in the Methods there are odd sentences like:

‘If the person was still not at home …’ and ‘One single interviewer administered the SMAF to all of the participants in Dioula or French (according to the preference of the participant). All of the questionnaires were completed and verified.’

Not stating the professional qualifications skills of this single interviewer and how they administered the SMAF is problematic. As well, given the statement in the results section – ‘Of the 377 people who were contacted’ and in the discussion section - ‘it is possible, but unlikely, that older people would have underestimated their level of disability’, this leads me to infer that this interviewer did not score the participant’s actual performance but rather accepted the self-reported response from participants. This constitutes a significant variation to how SMAF is to be administered. It is clearly stated in published literature to avoid the under-reporting of disabilities by participants that the validation is based on their perceptions AND objective observations. If this was performed in the study reported in the manuscript then this information must be clearly inserted into it.

3. Is the interpretation (discussion and conclusion) well balanced and supported by the data?

Because of this unknown influence of the larger study and the lack of detail as to how the SMAF was administered, I am left with the feeling that there is questionable justification for the interpretations in this manuscript. With more care to the methods section this may be able to be addressed.

4. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to allow others to evaluate and/or replicate the work?

The Methods section needs a lot more attention to detail please. As described the methods are not in my view reproducible by peers in the field. In my previous comments I have elaborated what needs attention.

5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the methods?

There needs to be discussion on the limitations of the use of PRISMA-7 and SMAF. There is no discussion on the limitations of the study.

6. Can the writing, organization, tables and figures be improved?

It is important that the authors take care with terminology and offer definitions as to how they define terms like for example elders, older people, functional disability, functional autonomy, functional status, key actors, and social system. They need to ensure the use of terms is in line with international literature and that they do not interchange terms that are understood to have different meanings. I feel that the figures are too simplistic and do not add new information especially given what is already in the international literature. The table is also
too confusing. The actual formatting of references in the reference list seems to be incomplete and I was not able to locate many using information made available.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests