Reviewer’s report

Title: Assessment of the Infectious Diseases Surveillance System of the Republic of Armenia: an Example of Surveillance in the Republics of the Former Soviet Union

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Reviewer: Dr Paul Garner

Level of interest: not specified

Advice on publication: Other (see below)

Resubmission to BMC
1. The authors have certainly done some work to improve this paper, and it is a little clearer about what they are trying to communicate. However, the methods are still weak and the connection between the conclusions and the inferences are still not clear. In addition, I as a general reader, who knows the topic but doesn't know the situation they are describing, find it difficult really to identify the data on which they extract their inferences and conclusions.
2. The main problem here is probably we are reading an opinion piece from people with a high level of operational experience but who are having difficulty in expressing this in what appears to be a scientific paper. If it was a commentary/opinion piece then I think we would be OK, but it is the lack of rigour that emerges from trying to shape this mixture of opinion and observation into something that is a helpful case study and has implications that are potentially generalisable to other systems in the former Soviet Union.
3. It's full of generalities too-they state on page 11, for example, that the rapid system of reporting in 24 to 48 hours "for most conditions under surveillance allowed rapid implementation of control and prevention measures". How do we know this and what diseases are they talking about? What is the EVIDENCE for this statement? If it was reported from focus groups then state this was the opinion of these groups.
4. This is combined with a text that muddles up information, opinion, background, recommendations and judgements and it comes out rather lumpy. For example, on page 10, the middle paragraph starting "sensitivity measures..." The first sentence is general comment. The second gives information about the study site. The third is sentence is incomprehensible, and the final sentence is a comment that judges that the laboratory confirmation was limited due to a) lack of supplies, which in turn was due to b) reduced government funding allocation. I really come away unclear what the paragraph means and how the information was deduced. It would be much better to separate all this anecdotes and make the article clearer, more punch.
5. The authors need to really work on the text to make it easier to read and they need to go through each para to make sure it is clear and consistent between sections. For example, on page 13 the
authors state that the old system was useful because it...documented outbreaks. Yet they have previously told us that people often did not document outbreaks as this indicated a failure of disease control. These seem mutually incompatible statements.

6. I think it is worth the authors continuing to try and improve this article as I think there is a message in there but at the moment it remains inaccessible to people who are unfamiliar with the system and problems they are describing. I don't doubt that this group are doing important work in this area, and they are very clear through their experience and working in this area what the problems are and the potential solutions. They need examples of instances when things happened or didn't happen, examples of lists of diseases, more information describing the system and the outputs.

7. On page 15, a series of recommendations are made. For someone unfamiliar with the situation they are describing, it is not at all clear how it links to the previous text. For example, if they want to categorise things into a three tiered system, what is the finding from their study / situational analysis that leads to this, and where else has such a system worked well? Another example: suddenly the authors are recommending people should do case control studies-where does this come from? For what disease do they think this could be useful? What from the data they have collected is there an instance where this would help?

Specifics
8. There are examples of repetition from sloppy cutting and pasting. So, on page 14, the 3rd Para, second sentence, "For example, it was common practice.." is identical to the sentence at the bottom of page 10.

9. The methods: they state that they conducted focus group sessions, but don't say who they interviewed, and their methods for this. All they say is "questions were determined after focus group sessions". What questions were they trying to determine and then to whom did they address them? They say the interviewed 23 health care workers at four types of facilities, but what did they ask them? Were the questions based on the focus group discussions?

10. On page 8, they describe the AIDSS system as it was before reform on 64 diseases, which included cases that were required to be reported within 24 hr hours. What were these diseases? Can they provide a table to demonstrate what they were saying? Did they report incidence and prevalence of all 64? What, in the focus group discussions, did people say the denominator was derived from? Did it really work before?

11. The report form described for cases and contacts: was this for all 64 diseases, or just for the ones that were notifiable? Again, an indicator of what was notifiable would help, with some results from the focus group discussions about whether these were actually filled in.

12. In relation to page 10, the authors note that there was no laboratory confirmation required, and no standard case definition. Can they give an example? Would they expect scabies, for example, to have laboratory confirmation?

13. Page 11. They say "because budget were relatively non-existent in the FSU..." What does this mean? Was everyone paid for from central government budgets, so they don't know how much they costed? Can they not give us some indication of resource use from the data they have collected, for example how many staff was employed at an FSU, how many reports they filled in etc? I can understand this is a personal observation, but how does the reader know this?

**Competing interests:**

None declared.