Reviewer's report

Title: Gender distribution of adult patients on highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) in Southern Africa: a systematic review.

Version: 1 Date: 14 January 2007

Reviewer: Lisa Hirschhorn

Reviewer's report:

General
The authors address an important concern about gender disparities in uptake of HAART in resource limited settings. However the paper should be considerably strengthened in a number of areas. This includes providing more background on history of disparities in accessing ART in women in resource richer settings, any data which may be available for gender and access in other health care systems in RLS, and more sophisticated use of the available data

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1. In the abstract, it notes significant concerns about women accessing HAART, however in the published literature, it is men who seem to be having the potential challenges. Addressing this issue as gender equity rather than decreased access for women would strengthen the entire article. This could be further followed by exploring in the discussion potential reasons why this program as opposed to others have seen gender disparity in the opposite direction than expected or than seen in other programs in similar resourced settings.

2. Additional analyses which would significantly strengthen the paper include:
   . Exploratory univariate analyses to determine where males have the least disparity in care, including national ratios, country age of program, program type (pay or not), etc. The number of programs would limit the ability for multivariate modeling, but this should be a potential future direction

3. The discussion would be strengthened by addressing other potential reasons for higher access by women, which may be due to the expansion of PMTCT programs which enable women to be tested and so more easily achieve the first step towards accessing HIV. Similarly any information about gender differences in stigma or other reasons of decreased male access would be important.

4. The table should be made more useful. There is no clear order beyond clustering by country in which the studies are presented (?by date of completion, but not consistent), and one date is missing. In addition the table would be considerably strengthened by adding columns describing if these were pay or free, adjusted ratio based on the national gender ratios.,

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Table is missing the dates for the study “Bisson et al”

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions
Level of interest: An article of limited interest

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'