Reviewer's report

Title: Systematic Review of Effectiveness of School-Based Sexual Health Interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Version: Date: 12 June 2007

Reviewer: Ademola Ajuwon

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Title of paper: Systematic review of effectiveness of school-based sexual health interventions in sub-Saharan Africa

Reviewer: Ademola J. Ajuwon

General
This paper is a review of published articles on interventions directed at preventing HIV/AIDS among in-school adolescents in sub-Saharan African countries. The paper is a synthesis of published selected articles that describe interventions aimed at preventing sexually transmitted diseases including HIV, which are major public health problems affecting many adolescents and young persons in sub-Saharan African countries. The number of papers included in the review is small due to the rigorous inclusion criteria set by the authors. The paper will benefit from several suggestions that will improve the overall quality of the paper.

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

1. I suggest a change in the title of the paper to read “A review of effectiveness of school-based interventions to prevent STI/HIV in sub-Saharan Africa”. This title better captures the essence of the paper.
2. The paper has no page numbers written in it; this should be done to ensure easy referencing.
3. There is need for clarification with respect to the scope of the review; is it that the review was conducted during 1986-2006 or that the scope of the review was limited to articles published during this period?
4. The background information described in the introduction of the paper is weak and needs to be strengthened. For example, there is need to fully describe the impact of HIV among young Africans beyond mere figures. The authors need to fully describe the gap in knowledge that the review seeks to address. A full description of these issues will provide justification for the review and strengthen this component of the paper.
5. The methodology for conducting this review is not clear. For example, the authors mentioned in the abstract that 1,020 articles were scanned, 23 were selected for full critical review but these details are not mentioned at all in the methodology. The authors also stated that the WHO and UNAIDS websites were searched but did not indicate the web addresses. Although the authors developed a data extraction and quality assessment forms for the purpose of the study, the contents of these were not provided. The authors mentioned in the discussion section of the paper that the studies by Brieger, Okonofua and Shuey were excluded from the review but the basis for their exclusion were not provided. Why were studies conducted in East Africa excluded from the study as mentioned in the discussion section? In revising this section, the authors should clearly state the step-by-step procedures they adopted in conducting the review, the criteria for inclusion, the number of papers identified and the type of information extracted from each paper.
6. There is inconsistency and confusion in the results section with respect to the actual number of papers reviewed. The authors mentioned that 12 papers from 10 studies were reviewed: this is confusing and it should be clarified to make it clearer. Tanzania is in East Africa and not Southern Africa as the author have stated in the results.
7. I do not think a description of the profile of students (age, social-economic status, location of schools) presented under the “description of included studies and participants” add any value to the paper and this should be deleted. The authors should elaborate on the component of the social learning theories used in developing the interventions described in the studies cited.
8. The idea of creating Tables that summarize the data extracted from the papers reviewed is good; however no reference is made to the details the reader need to know about the information provided in them. The authors referred to the tables by merely suggesting where they should be inserted in the paper. This is not enough.
9. There are several vague sentences in the discussion section of the paper. For example, what does the
statement “… but proportionate distribution in location of studies relative to prevalence rate of cases in the epidemic’ mean? Are the authors implying that more intervention studies have been published in Southern Africa because HIV/AIDS has had a stronger foothold in this region than others? This may not be the case as the study is focusing only on published articles and not on intervention activities in the region per se. Other vague sentences are 1) “conducting an intervention during school hours promoted the opportunity for interaction between researchers and stakeholders and thus effectiveness …” who are the stakeholders been referred to here; 2) “there is also possibility of publication bias… particularly as this review concentrated on studies undertaken in resource constrained environment that is characteristic of most sub-Saharan Africa”. How does issue of resource constraints affect publication of intervention studies; please clarify.

10. The authors should discuss the full implications of why behaviors have been very difficult to change among adolescents. Appropriate recommendations on how to solve this problem in future intervention programming should be discussed. There is need for fuller discussion of how “the findings of this review are in keeping with the attributes of effective interventions as described in the review by Kirby’.

11. The authors need to conform to the reference style of BMC Public Health. I suggest that they read the instructions for authors.

12. The authors need to create a separate sub-heading for recommendations arising from the review.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
1. Adolescents should be among the keywords.
2. References should not include initials in the text (see Singhal and Rogers in the introduction section of the paper)
3. References should be arranged alphabetically; for example Klepp should precede Kirby
4. Adolescents should be listed as a key word in the abstract.
5. The last sentence “this approach also addresses cultural issues/beliefs of this particular region” in introduction is not clear and should be revised.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

None

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

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

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 interest