Author’s response to reviews

Title: Palliative Care in Sub-Saharan Africa: a Systematic Review of the Qualitative Literature

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Version: 2 Date: 21 October 2010

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(The following covering letter does not relate to revisions in the article rather the first submission of the article to BMC Palliative Care)

Dear Editor(s),

Whilst much attention and funding is focused on curing or preventing the major infectious diseases and on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, millions suffer and die in pain in rural Africa because of the absence of basic palliative care. Palliative care in Africa still lacks an adequate evidence-base, which is urgently needed for the development of effective service provision. There is also very little information on the needs at the end of life and experiences of patients and their carers.

This systematic review, which appraises and synthesises the qualitative research literature on end of life care in sub-Saharan Africa, is an important step toward developing such an evidence-base. It adds to an influential review that mapped the general literature as well as service developments in palliative care in Africa (Harding and Higginson 2005). Our review maps the areas covered by qualitative research, highlights novel findings, and sheds light on the central themes in palliative care that are of global importance: the burden of care, informal caregiving, place of care and death, good and bad death, stigma, culture-specific approaches to symptoms and illness, and the bereavement process. This review identifies areas relevant for a research agenda on socio-cultural issues at the EoL in Africa.

This review is important because it focuses on evidence, which is crucial for the provision of culturally competent care in the African setting. Also, the search was updated and the review includes the most recent publications on this topic.

Palliative care practitioners, policy makers and medical researchers more generally would benefit from this review and we feel that it is especially suited to publication in a journal with a broad readership like BMC Palliative Care.
Yours faithfully,

Dr. M. Gysels