Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Christine Ingleton

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This is an interesting topic area for review and will be of interest to a wide readership. On the whole, it is well written and in an acceptable academic style, though there are some errors in grammar and syntax. However there are a number of fairly major areas of concern, mainly relating to the method and lack of critique which would need addressing before publication could be considered.

1) Background: The background is reasonable and sets the scene. However for readers who do not have an in-depth knowledge of palliative care in resource poor countries more ‘scene setting’ is needed. A short synthesis of the different beginnings of palliative care in Africa is needed. The work of Wright (2003) who combines five indices to identify resource poor countries, Africa, in particular, in relation to health care and the development of palliative care is significant here. Strjernsward and Clark 2004 is another literary source. Major compulsory revision.

2) Methodology: A number of problems exist within this section. There is not a clear research question. Rather there are some rather vague objectives in which key concepts are not well operationalised. Palliative care and end of life care are terms which are used interchangeably, which is problematic. A clear and focussed research question needs to be articulated. The systematic review (as it is described) operates on the assumption that it is both desirable and possible to attempt to integrate individual qualitative research studies, in order to build up a cumulative body of empirical work to better inform health policy and practice and to identify areas relevant for research agenda on socio-cultural issues. This needs critique and an acknowledgement of some of the challenges which exists. What is crucial, however, is that the methodology developed to synthesise qualitative research is appropriate to the research being integrated and this warrants further work. Also was a scoping review of the literature undertaken to establish whether a qualitative systematic review in this topic area had been previously conducted?. It should be acknowledged that searching for qualitative studies in electronic databases presents particular problems in relation to the specificity and recall of the number of records obtained. While filters have been devised and tested for RCTs and other types of study, work on filters for qualitative research is in the early stages of development and those developed are not always practically usable. The search terms are well described in the Appendices. How were they subsequently divided into categories (i.e. study design V subject topic area). What steps were taken to ensure that the quality
assessment enabled a high degree of reliability and validity (rigour), particularly in respect to whether those deemed ‘untrustworthy’ in terms of findings and conclusions were excluded? It does seem surprising that all the studies were deemed ‘good’ and none had weaknesses. Relevant sources were searched for studies, but the restriction to published studies and the exclusion of some non-English studies meant that the review was prone to language and publication biases. Steps were taken to minimise the risk of error and bias in validity assessment and data extraction by having more than one reviewer make decisions independently, but it was unclear whether this also applied to study selection. Study validity was assessed, but the framework addressed only a limited range of criteria and no details were reported on any critique of the studies, which made it difficult to be certain of the reliability of the evidence presented. Major compulsory revision.

3) Findings: The narrative synthesis grouped studies in a logical way and appropriately highlighted the differences between findings specifically relevant to the African context. It was unclear why the review excluded ‘cost of care’ and then went on to examine financial burden in many of the subsequent themes. There was a very good description of findings but no critical examination of any bias created by methodological variation between the studies was highlighted in the text. Major compulsory revision in parts.

4) The authors’ conclusions may need to be interpreted with some caution, mainly due to limitations in the search, heterogeneity of the primary studies and the lack of a clear research question. Some of the limitations are highlighted in the paper but not all, see points above. The conclusion is rather anodyne and non-specific. I am not sure what the final sentence means, ‘the concept’s defining features’? Major compulsory revision.

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

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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.