Reviewer’s report

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

**Version:** 3  **Date:** 24 December 2010

**Reviewer:** Liz Grant

**Reviewer’s report:**

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

Yes, the paper sets out to provide a systematic review of qualitative studies in the African context. However, the purpose of the review to provide additional evidence for policy makers, practitioners and researchers and to provide a sound evidence base is not fully addressed, as further analysis is necessary.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

The process of review is partially explained. Suggest authors include which “relevant journals” were examined in text. Not clear why papers focussing on cost of care were excluded, explanation would be helpful. The judgement of good, fair and poor should be further explained in the text.

3. Are the data sound? yes

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

Yes. The results section is divided into a number of sections eg Burden of palliative care, training, support needs and tools, place of care, good death versus bad death, bereavement, culture specific experiences and approaches to symptoms, illness, death, and caring etc. Some of these overlap, and information is given in the sections but the studies analysis and interpretations are not fully given. For example sentences such as “Time spent on caring diverted time from food” is unclear and needs unpacking; Caregivers health was compromised (but in what way, and how - the original studies did explore these issues so important to include.)

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

The discussion section has a second series of headings, some of which parallel the results section, but others which are new. Clarity on why this has been done would be helpful. The discussion section on "good death v bad death and stigma" needs to be separated and discussed much more analytically as there is a merging of data and inferences.

The paper points to the important fact that findings from the various research papers can inform the design of training interventions to add value, it is important that this paper shows how and in what way this can happen, as this will make the paper much more exciting and valuable to the research, policy and practitioner
community.

Understandably many papers focus on HIV. A comment in the discussion section is needed to explain why this is the case and how such papers can provide evidence to address the greater needs for palliative care across all domains of illness in SSA.

Conclusion asserts that the paper supports quantitative research but there is no assessment of the thematic areas of quantitative research to which this refers. The final paragraph of the conclusion, while interesting and important, is inferring more than the data of the paper commits to.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

The strengths and limitations section is small. I think there needs to be more information on why the text of 11 papers could not be located, even some information on where the papers were situated and the nature of the issues that they covered. It would also be useful to have some more information on the 6 studies published in languages other than English in order to provide some assessment of geographical spread. Were any of the papers reviewed translated into French or Portuguese? While the spread of countries covered by the research studies is obviously not in the control of the authors, it would be useful for readers to gain a sense of whether there was much data emerging from francophone countries which constitute a large part of central and west Africa.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

Abstract could be tightened and provide more essential information such as the full number of articles reviewed. Is it all studies which describe home based care? Correct spelling mistakes in abstract.

Again conclusion suggests that the data supports/ complements findings from quantitative research though no ref to what quantitative research is being referred to.

9. Is the writing acceptable? There are typos to be corrected, and there are cases of verb and adjective constructions that confuse the meaning of the sentence eg “described widely”. Some sentences need to be tightened. Assertions and assumptions are made that require evidence, eg the sentence the epidemiology of the problem is described widely” infers that problem which palliative care tackles is HIV. Commentary such as that only in Uganda, South Africa, Kenya and Zimbabwe are services “reaching a level of integration into the existing health system” need supporting data as each health system is different. Generalisations should be avoided. In the background section the authors note the problematic issue of transferring interventions into an “African Context” without clarifying the complexity and diversity of the “African” context.

While there needs to be more work done of translating the findings of both quantitative and qualitative research into practice it is not absolutely true to say that qualitative research is hitherto rarely consulted by palliative care planners.
There are changes in the tense structure in sentences which make the meaning hard to follow

Major Compulsory Revisions

Further explanations in text where meaning is unclear, and a tighter analysis of the results are necessary

Minor Essential Revisions

Typos and sentence structures including tense changes

Discretionary Revisions

**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