Reviewer's report

Title: Understanding of research and informed consent: a Sri Lankan Perspective

Version: 2 Date: 16 September 2009

Reviewer: Christine Grady

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Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript on “Understanding of research and informed consent: a Sri Lankan Perspective”

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
   Yes. Their stated goal is to address the lack of empirical evidence on understanding of research in Sri Lanka, individual’s willingness to participate and what information is needed to make a decision.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
   Methods were qualitative interviews with individuals who had previously participated in research and individuals who had not. Participants were recruited using snowball technique and convenience sampling. Qualitative data were coded by 2 members of the team and analyzed through content analysis, quantitative data with SPSS. Methods are clearly described and appropriate.

3. Are the data sound?
   Much of the data reported is in the form of quotes from the participant interviews. These are grouped by the question to which they were answered. In each section, however, there are ‘themes’ identified as responses to the questions. For each theme there is a % of participants listed. I would like to see more explanation regarding how themes were defined and how responses were sorted in order to end up with a % response. Also, the % do not add up to 100, this should be explained.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
   I would find it much clearer if the authors could organize their qualitative findings in an easier to read format (see proposed table as an example). It would also help to line up the supporting quotes to the themes that were identified and quantified. For example, in the quotes that describe research, it is not clear how the quotes they listed in the manuscript support the list of themes. It would also help to know how the authors are distinguishing the meaning of terms such as ‘searching’ from that of ‘finding’ for example— are they really different and if so, how? Or how were people assigned to having said one of these instead of the other?
THE TABLE THAT I WANTED TO SUGGEST AS AN EXAMPLE DOES NOT COPY INTO YOUR WEBSITE. I WILL EMAIL IT SEPARATELY UNLESS YOU CAN TELL ME HOW TO UPLOAD?

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

The conclusions they draw are somewhat limited— that participants had a ‘reasonable’ understanding of many of the concepts. I think this discussion could be expanded— what is reasonable? What isn’t? How does the understanding attributed to the participants compare to understanding by participants from studies in other places?

The authors also state 2 conclusions that may not be so clearly supported by the data. The first (p.10, 2nd par under Discussion) “These findings show that a decision about taking part in research is not only dependent on… but also on the views of their immediate social network of family and friends.” Is this simply because they said they would consult family/friends? The other (page 10, 3rd par under Discussion) “It appears that participants only had a vague idea about government being an agency conducting research… This raises questions about public opinion of government involvement in research in Sri Lanka”. Participants were asked about what sort of people conduct research and they said health professionals and scientists. It doesn’t appear that they were then asked— who do these scientists work for- so why would they offer the response “government agency”? Also, I am not sure the fact that most people did not offer ‘government’ as a response says anything about their opinion of government involvement in research.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? Some are.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? Some previous work cited in the intro. None in their description of the methods (questions chosen) or in the discussion.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
I would suggest changing the title to “Understanding of research: a Sri Lankan perspective”. They did not have data specific to informed consent.

9. Is the writing acceptable? Yes.

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

# Page numbers
# Change subtitles containing ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ under willingness to participate in research (p.8) to something more clearly related to willingness, such as: Types of research willing to join, and Types of research unwilling to join

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

Presentation of the data (see comments under #4 above).

**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 interests'