Reviewer’s report

Title: I wish I could read on the Internet: the cure for HIV was just discovered: Perceptions of people living with HIV in Peru towards information technology

Version: 2 Date: 25 May 2007

Reviewer: Francisco Bastos

Reviewer’s report:

General

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

As a researcher based on another developing country, Brazil, I think the so called “digital exclusion” should be mentioned, i.e. most people (even the poorest ones) use cell phones, but have a precarious (if any) access to the internet.

Access to internet cafes is expensive for many of them (the authors mentioned the relatively low cost of internet cafes in Peru, but I suppose they are describing the Lima urban scene, but certainly not the situation prevailing in small villages and the countryside, as well as highlighting the access to the internet of low middle-class people, but not considering homeless/unemployed people, who do exist in our countries in large numbers and have been particularly affected by AIDS), they have no internet access at home, so most of the time they have intermittent access to the internet or no access at all. Beyond the issue of access itself, there is the additional question of literacy and poor command (or no command at all) of English, a key language in terms of biomedical information in the field of HIV/AIDS or any other field. There is no doubt such resource is a valid one (“acceptable and feasible”, verbatim), but it may reinforce inequality instead of helping to ameliorate it in some cases.

Despite the fact qualitative studies do not use representative samples from a statistical point or view, biases still matter. There is a clear gender bias in the sample, with the enrollment of 28 men and only 3 women! This gender bias should be fixed, enrolling additional women and/or explained (due to the characteristics of the local epidemic?). Since the epidemic “has been concentrated among MSM and female sex workers” (verbatim), where are the FSWs? Do they have access to the internet or not?

The authors mention a relevant issue, the possibility to receive updated information on HIV/AIDS and STDs by cell phones (either as audio or text messages), but one key question remains. Did they probe the interviewees about the sources of those messages? There is a relevant point here: are the putative messages reliable? Which sources do the interviewees consider reliable? Do such perceived reliability match the experts’ opinions about the accuracy/lack of accuracy of the information. One must remember that reliable information may be beneficial, but unreliable information may be rather harmful.

The issue of confidentiality should be linked to the related issue of “disclosure of sensitive information” (and putative stigmatization and eventual punishment for illicit behaviors such as the use of substances and commercial sex in some settings) in the context of face-to-face interviews versus computer-assisted interviews. The recent paper addressing related issues in the context of another developing country (Brazil) may be helpful to discuss such topics. Please, see: Simoes AA, Bastos FI, Moreira RI, Lynch KG, Metzger DS. A randomized trial of audio computer and in-person interview to assess HIV risk among drug and alcohol users in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil. J Subst Abuse Treat. 2006 Apr;30(3):237-43.

The papers written on similar issues by L. Sherr, from the University College of London cannot be ignored and should be mentioned in the Discussion, her perspective is obviously distinct from the authors’ perspective, but represents another key link between HIV/AIDS and the internet, as stated by the authors themselves (“may facilitate HIV transmission risk”, verbatim).
Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

“Variation in the information behaviors” is a quite vague and inaccurate way to discuss the findings of a qualitative study. Please, rephrase.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

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

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

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