Reviewer’s report

Title: High rates of burnout among maternal health staff at a referral hospital in Malawi: A cross-sectional study

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Reviewer: Maralyn Foureur

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High rates of burnout among maternal health staff at a referral hospital in Malawi: A cross-sectional study.

Rationale for the study: The human resource crisis in Africa is an important issue for the health workforce and health outcomes. It is a critical issue for maternal health care if the country is to achieve the Millennium Development Goal #5 to reduce the maternal mortality ratio by 75% by 2015. Understanding the causes of burnout amongst maternal health staff is therefore an important issue to study. This paper adds to the literature that considers the particular issues that face the health workforce in Malawi and may contribute knowledge to understanding this issue in the wider African health workforce.

The research aims are well defined in the closing comments to the background of the study – to examine the prevalence and degree of burnout reported by healthcare workers who provide antenatal, intrapartum and postnatal services in a district referral hospital in Malawi; and, to explore factors that may influence the level of burnout healthcare workers experience.

1. Minor Essential Revision: This information (the aims of the study) needs to be added to the abstract of the study.

2. Major Compulsory Revision: The research method is appropriate and the study is well designed. Inferences can be made from the findings of a cross-sectional survey about the whole population of maternal health workers in Malawi. However a potential major limitation lies with the choice of measurement instruments: the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the Maslach Human Services Development Data Sheet. Apart from discussion that some terms were clarified, there is no comment about the cultural appropriateness of the Maslach Burnout Inventory for this particular population. The authors do not appear to have considered whether the MBI is culturally specific or whether it is directly transferable to different cultures from the one in which it was originally developed and where it has been tested for validity and reliability. The paper would therefore be strengthened by some comment on the use of the MBI in cross-cultural research.

3. Minor Essential Revision: Results of the study are accurately presented. Since the major finding was related to the number of children- it would be interesting to read the actual questions that led to this finding. Were there several or only one question- how does this issue relate to childcare which is discussed in the paper?
Were there questions about childcare?

4. Minor Discretionary Revision: The conclusion is appropriate but it focuses only on the idea that burnout detracts from quality of care and may contribute to poor patient outcomes. While these are of course extremely important issues, the health and wellbeing of the workforce is of equal importance so the paper would be strengthened by a comment on the issue of burnout for the workers themselves.

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

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.