Reviewer's report

Title: The financial losses from the migration of nurses from Malawi

Version: 3 Date: 27 August 2006

Reviewer: Amy Hagopian

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

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

The question is of interest to those concerned about world migration of health workers and the effects on sending countries. Calculating the costs of migration to countries that train health workers is a topic of growing interest in the literature. The most well known and recent such article is the one by JM Kirigia et al in BMC’s Health Services Research (17 July 2006). As additional authors contribute the estimates of costs in their countries, we can begin to form a more global picture of this important issue.

The current authors attempt to contribute data from Malawi.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

The methods approximate those used by Kirigia, including:
1) calculating the costs of primary and secondary education, as well as of professional training. It's very hard to follow the writing here, though: on one page, it says the cost of three years of nursing training is $4512, then in another place it says 21,527. (By way of comparison, the Kirigia estimate in Kenya was $43,180.)

2) calculating loss of investment. The authors don’t make a good case for including these costs and they don’t do sensitivity analysis. Kirigia did a much better job on this.

3) Costs of raising a child. It is entirely unclear why this is being done. If the authors are saying there are more costs included in producing a health professional than simply schooling, they are wading into murky water indeed. A case could be made for it, but the authors are double-counting the family’s expenditure on school fees in this method, among other problems.

The question this brings up is “from whose point of view are we estimating costs?” If we lump the private costs of childrearing with the public cost of supporting schooling and training institutions, then the private costs must be offset with remittance returns to families. The authors make no attempt to quantify private remittances, however. Migration theory informs us that families are making a wise investment in sending members abroad. As a way of thinking about diversification of risk, migration is a return on a family’s own private investment in upbringing and school fees.

The losses are already considerable, without adding in childrearing and moving the time periods to begin calculating loss on investment.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?

Hard to tell. There are no references for the data on school fees, and no particular sources for interest rates. Again, Kirigia did a better job on this.

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

Okay.

5. Is the writing acceptable?
The writing is quite poor and difficult to follow. It would benefit from a thorough edit of everything from structure and flow of the article to sentence structure and grammar.

ADVICE:
I would encourage the authors to be in contact with Joses Muuthuri Kirigia, the author of the model paper from Kenya. His paper set forward a methodology and approach that has benefited from peer review and is a model for conducting this sort of analysis. The authors in Malawi should simply model their article along the lines of Kirigia’s work. They would contribute their own data, and could comment on the consequences of the costs to their own country. But they should follow the methods used by Kirigia, as these seem to be now established and accepted. If they want to add commentary about the costs of upbringing, they could simply mention that schooling is not the only cost involved in producing health professionals.

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

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

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.