Reviewer's report

Title: Empirical studies on informal patient payments for health care services: A systematic and critical review of research methods and instruments

Version: 3 Date: 3 June 2010

Reviewer: George Gotsadze

Reviewer's report:

Authors are recommended to closely edit Annex 1 and references as I have noted some inconsistencies between these two.

In the discussions section possible linkages and/or use of approaches used in corruption studies needs little more elaboration. It is not clear what exactly authors mean.

Furthermore, little more discussions seems necessary to highlight the challenges of blurring boundaries, when studying informal payments. While surveys are broadly used approach many patients find it difficult to determine which payment (or part of it) constitutes informal payment. In our studies we have found this as most challenging, which significantly limits any further discussions about magnitude of informal payments. Authors may want to little bit expand on this challenges and offer appropriate and more practical recommendation (if possible).

In the concluding paragraph of the paper I do not find adequate substantiation for the point (4) "assuring the respondents on the issues of confidentiality and explaining why the data on informal patient payments are important". The results of this review do not say much that confidentiality was a significant problem. Therefore, it is not clear why this is being highlighted in the recommendations.

Authors find recall period to be important feature of the studies, but do not make any recommendation on this issue.

And finally, in our opinion and in order to study magnitude of the informal payment phenomenon in the health sector it is better to use macro data on a national level, where available. Namely based on NHA (National Health Accounts) estimates one could subtract public expenditure, private expenditures made formally by various institutions (e.g. private insurance companies, corporations and/or non-governmental entities serving households), external financing and private out-of-pocket expenditures (which have been recorded and reported through state statistical offices). We think all these expenditures constitute formal transactions in the health sector. Remaining portion from the THE will represent overall size of the informal payment in a given economy, which is the relevant information for a policy maker to pay attention. And we
found it more appealing for Minister's of health and financing to pay attention to this information. Authors, may want to consider this as an alternative to study THE SIZE of informal payments. Obviously surveys are needed to look at frequency of out-of-pocket payments, their size and also consumers attitudes towards "informal" payments in general, however blurring boundaries of informal payments does not allow exact estimation of th magnitude of informal payments only through HH surveys.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**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