Author's response to reviews

Title: Assessment of service quality of public antiretroviral treatment (ART) clinics in South Africa: a cross-sectional study

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Author's response to reviews: see over
To:

The editors of BMC Health Services Research

Dear Simon Harold,

Thank you for your response on our paper.

We appreciate the suggestions and comments made by the reviewers. Below, you will find our responses and changes. The page numbers refer to the revised manuscript.

Reviewer 1: Ralf Weigel

General comment

The authors have responded to the comments and revised the manuscript accordingly. The discussion does not put the findings in context with research on quality of ART service delivery from African countries outside South Africa.

We agree. However, firstly, we believe that our research is very contextual to South Africa and that discussing our findings in a broader “African” context is not the main focus of this paper. Secondly, to the best of our knowledge no research in other African countries or elsewhere in the world was done using participant observers to assess service quality. This would have allowed us at least to compare results obtained by a similar methodological approach.

- Major Compulsory Revisions

Abstract:

1. Under results average duration was 4.6 hours. Is this really average or median as stated later in the paper?- please clarify.

It correctly should say “median”. However, the sentence was deleted. Please see comment and response to reviewer 2 below.
2. Under conclusion you state “significant” (also elsewhere in the paper). This term should be reserved for findings that show significance through statistical analysis. As far as I can see you have not undertaken any statistical significance testing.

    We follow the advice to reserve the word “significant” for its use in a statistical context. We have revised the whole paper accordingly (p.3, p.12, p.14, p.15)

3. Discussion, last paragraph. The authors mention “low statistical power”. This seems not relevant as no statistical tests were performed. Probably mention that relatively small number of observations limits ability to generalise.

    We agree and have made changes accordingly.

- Discretionary revisions

4. Abstract: I do not understand the logic of the opening sentence. Why does an increasing demand for ART mean that public sector ART sites in RSA are perceived as providing suboptimal care?

    We have revised the opening and the following two sentences.

5. Background, last paragraph: Is RSA really a resource limited setting?

    We would say that RSA is a resource limited setting even though it is a middle income country for two primary reasons. Firstly, financial resources allocated to the public health sector fall far short of the health needs of the majority of the population under the sway of a quadruple burden of disease (HIV/TB, non-communicable diseases, violence/injury, high maternal and child mortality). Secondly, South Africa faces a very serious “human resource” crisis that is a legacy of historical exclusions especially of the black majority combined with a system that is being swamped by mounting health care demands.

6. Results, under services accessed: “Access to services is a factor...” Probably it would be better to say: Access to services is influenced by general availability and actual availability at the day of the visit.

    We agree and have made changes accordingly.

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

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

The article has been thoroughly reviewed regarding language

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Reviewer 2

1) The tense in which the paper has been written flips between current and past tense. As the study has been performed in the past, the tense of the paper should be ‘past tense’.

    We agree and are now consequently using the “past tense”

Abstract:

2) p2: The statement on the duration per visit comes out of the blue — if this is a problem it should be indicated in the background of the abstract.

    We agree and have cut the sentence. We believe that this does not affect the message of the abstract.
Background:

3) p4 “A comprehensive evaluation in Gauteng of two community health centres (CHC) and two hospital-based chronic care management and treatment (CCMT) sites providing ART found that it is possible to deliver quality chronic care in the public health system…” This is jargon – if this ‘high quality’ please say so

We agree and have revised this sentence (p.4)

P5 “As an example, the nurse at the front station is expected to greet the patient, introduce herself, call the patient by his/her name, check the vital signs of the patient (blood pressure, temperature, pulse), measure height and weight, identify and address the patient’s needs, ask for and address patient questions, show the patient where to go next and complete the requisite forms” Too detailed – suggest cut this

We follow this suggestion and have cut this paragraph (p.5)

Methods

What I miss here is a description how the various types of data are dealt with ie what are the methods used to analyze the qualitative data and which were used for the quantitative data?

We agree and have added information accordingly (p. 6). Please take note that we are only dealing with quantitative data.

P5/7 Bottom of this page refers to patients being recruited to be involved with participant observation. But then moves to a different topic on page 6 to return to selecting participants observes on page 7. Suggest to move the section on page 7 starting with “The criteria used for selecting participant observers..............” and ending “.....To ensure that the checklist worked and that the participant observers recorded meaningful information the method was tested twice prior to carrying out the assessment” – should be moved to following from the statement on page 5.

We agree and have revised the sections accordingly (p5,6,7)

P6. Description of treatment readiness could and should go into a box

We agree and have added a text box (p.6)

P8. What does the term ‘cadre’ mean? If you mean ‘staff’ please say ‘staff’.

We agree and use the term “staff” (several changes in the whole document)

P9. “.....counsellors negatively impacts on the time they spend with patients and the quality of the services...” or “.....counsellors reduced the time they spend with patients and the quality of the services....”

We agree and have revised the sentence accordingly (p.8)

P9 “.....the correlation coefficient R2 (a measure to estimate the strength of a relationship between two variables) was used......” – it is inappropriate to start inserting comments like these into the results section of a scientific paper. Firstly the description of which analytic methods used should be in the methods section and if readers of journals such as these need to have statistics explained to them then please not in such a ‘noddy guide’ fashion.

We agree and have deleted the explanation in brackets. We believe also that the readers of the journal are familiar with correlation coefficients. However, we have kept the sentence of how we interpreted the correlation coefficient. Please take note that this paragraph is in the “methods” section and not in the “results” section. (p. 8/9)
See above in terms of a lack of description in the current methods section of how data were actually collected and which analytic methods were used to analyze them.

Please see above. We have added more information for explanation (p.6)

Discussion

Can still be shortened.

We have reviewed the discussion in this regard. However we believe that the discussion is of appropriate length to discuss what we think needs to be discussed.

Yours sincerely

Dr. Hans-Friedemann Kinkel