Reviewer's report

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

Version: 2 Date: 31 January 2012

Reviewer: Eddy Beck

Reviewer's report:

1. Is the question posed original, important and well defined? Yes
2. Are the data sound and well controlled? Yes – see below
3. Is the interpretation (discussion and conclusion) well balanced and supported by the data? Yes but improvements can be made presentation – see below
4. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to allow others to evaluate and/or replicate the work? Yes – see below
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the methods? See below
6. Can the writing, organization, tables and figures be improved? Yes – see below.
7. When revisions are requested. I think the paper can be improved – see comments below.
8. Are there any ethical or competing interests issues you would like to raise? Unaware of any.

Thank you for asking me to review this interesting paper. I am sympathetic with the aim of the authors, i.e. to ascertain the quality of HIV services provided in- and around- Pretoria, South Africa.

General comments:

This is an interesting study that tries to quantify some of the qualitative aspects of HIV services provision. However the paper as it stands can be improved and sharpened so the main points of their findings can be highlighted. For this reviewer, the main finding pertains to the findings when seeing the clinicians and HIV counselors. Some of the findings here are indeed worrying and the paper should be recast to highlight these deficiencies more.

One assumes that the 16 clinics that were visited by the participant observers had given approval for this but that they were unaware who the actual participant observers were? Please elaborate.

Specific comments:
Abstract: result section very confusing – suggest mean reception area 76.5% (range ); clinician's consultation 64.5% (range…..) etc.

I would bring the clinician and HIV counseling forward as they are the worse and one could argue one of the most important.

Background: need a reference for the is the study referred to at the bottom of page 3 in Free State.

Methods: Table 3 is referred to first in this paper – in most journal this should be labeled ‘Table 1’.

I am not sure that I can accept 60-69% as ‘acceptable’ (p6) – I find this unacceptably low, especially given that the clinician and HIV counseling session were primarily affected.

Results: while means are provided for the various clinics, little or no reference is made to the ranges with many ranges falling well below 50%.

While I appreciate that the authors want to follow the path that patients take, the main problems encountered were with clinicians and HIV counseling. These should be highlighted.

P9 What is a ‘mean median’ time?

Authors have a heading of ‘correlations’ but do not actually discuss results. They, however, come back to this in the discussion – need to move the discussion of page 14 into the results section.

Discussion: Need to start with summarizing main findings – that can be followed by limitations. Currently the other way around and authors miss the impact of highlighting their findings. Findings reported on page 12/13 should be brought forward.

Suggest – Request authors to focus the paper in terms stated above and review new draft.