Reviewer's report

Title: Client perceptions of consent, confidentiality and counseling in provider-initiated and voluntary HIV counseling and testing services in Uganda

Version: 2 Date: 8 June 2013

Reviewer: Catrin Evans

Reviewer's report:

This was an interesting paper that adds to the now fairly strong body of evidence that PITC is acceptable to clients in the vast majority of contexts and countries. The value of the paper lies in its ability to demonstrate high levels of satisfaction and good practice in the essential elements of HIV testing.

I have some relatively minor comments and one suggestion for a more substantive revision – outlined below.

Major compulsory revision

• My main comment is that the paper feels rather dated. I understand that this is partly because it is presenting data that was collected over 5 years ago, but it is also because the references throughout refer to reports, statistics, studies and policy documents, that, for the most part, are over 4-5 years old. In order for the paper to feel relevant and contemporary, up to date references are required. In my view, the ethical ‘debate’ about PITC that is used to justify the focus of the paper has also now largely moved on. A more pressing issue for PITC is, as the authors point out in the discussion, about the quality of the interactions and the follow up – rather than whether it is acceptable and ethical per se from a client point of view. In the abstract, the authors note that the ‘client perspective has not been explored’. I would dispute this, as there have been several studies and systematic reviews that have been published that address this topic. An up to date review of the literature and HIV –related statistics is required in order to situate this study in the appropriate context. I also think it is important to mention the changing context of HIV care and testing as a result of the new evidence on TasP (treatment as prevention)

Minor essential revisions

• When describing the study methodology, using the term ‘interview’ and phrases such as ‘explore client perceptions and experiences’ (e.g. page 5 & page 7) gives the impression that this is a qualitative study. I would suggest using terms such as ‘structured interview’ or ‘questionnaire’ to ‘measure self-reported’..........................This study was a survey and should be reported as such.

• I have some problems with the way that this paper (and indeed much of the literature) continues to use the term ‘counselling’ when, in fact, as discussed,
PITC does not involve counselling at all but a structured approach to eliciting and giving information. When comparing VCT with PITC, we are not comparing like with like with respect to the ‘counselling’ element. This needs to be highlighted more strongly in the paper and I would suggest removing references to the term ‘counselling’ from any discussions about PITC - and simply referring to ‘consultation practices’ or ‘information giving’. To construct HIV testing within a counselling rather than a consultation or information giving framework by default raises a different set of expectations from clients, providers and also researchers. The key finding that clients appreciated the opportunity to ask questions suggests that the discourse and practice around ‘information giving’ perhaps needs to be examined more closely in future research. In my own experience in east African countries, I have observed that the vast majority of PITC encounters involve a highly didactic one way flow of information from provider to patient. Therefore, a recommendation from this study might be that practices associated with information giving need to be examined more closely to ensure that patients have an opportunity to raise concerns

- I did not understand the sentence on p.5 “……………..but it’s not known if the practice is as distinct”. Can this be clarified?
- Likewise on p.5 – can the larger study in which this one was nested be referenced?

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