Reviewer's report

Title: Do health systems delay the treatment of poor children? A qualitative study on child deaths in rural Tanzania.

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Reviewer: Claudia Hanson

Reviewer's report:

The paper covers important aspects of delays in delivery for health services for small children. The focus of the paper is on the third delay (delays at the facility level) and uses qualitative methods (interviews and observation) analysed using an inductive approach. The topics outlined and discussed are very relevant for this setting and even beyond. The authors have summarised factors such as payments, inadequate referral systems, inefficient organisation of care and the culture of communication which constitute important barriers.

Major compulsory revision:

The paper would benefit from major revision to increase credibility of the results and conclusion by following the common structure in a more strict way and by including more background information from participants and settings.

1) Overall layout of the paper

The paper does not always follow the common structure of background/introduction, methods, results, discussion and conclusion.

As an example: in the Introduction section, line 18, the authors write: “In contrast to this, we found that ...” which is rather belonging to the discussion section.

In line 30 of the background/introduction the authors present results whereas the results section is lacking an overall introduction in thematic areas found during the analysis, instead the section opens with qualitative citation of a case.

In the results section, second paragraph “Treatment and medication at public health facilities...” the authors rather present a discussion section with citations which might be better moved to the discussion section.

2) Introduction: The introduction covers the important aspects, but might better exclude results. The aim is stated in line 27-30 which might be moved to the end of this section to follow conventions.

3) Method: It is not clear why finally 17 mothers were selected. The authors report having done 174 interviews, 49 in Mpwapwa and finally 17 cases were included; while the table only includes 13 cases. The selection of cases (inclusion, exclusion) is not clear to the reader. The authors might expand on the
way they analysed the data.

4) Results: A paragraph describing the cases is missing, such as age, poverty status,...Also a more general description of findings at the beginning of result section would be helpful before embarking onto the four major topics.A description of participants would help to expand on generalisability of findings and a final judgment whether these findings are only relevant to poor children, or all children as suggested by the title.

5) Discussion: The paper would profit from an expanded discussion of findings which is partly presented as part of the results section. In particular, limitations of the methodology might be added.

In the third paragraph of the discussion section the authors conclude that “all three phases of delay play a role”. This is for sure a right statement, but the aim of the study was to describe delays in the health facility and the data presented in this paper do not support this statement.

6) Conclusion: The authors conclude that “especially the poorest families experience delay..”. It might be more prudent to rephrase this conclusion because this qualitative study might not be able to distinguish between richer and poorer families because the numbers of cases are limited.

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

**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