Reviewer's report

Title: Monitoring the referral system through benchmarking in rural Niger: an evaluation of the functional relation between health centres and the district hospital

Version: 2 Date: 14 March 2006

Reviewer: Albrecht Jahn

Reviewer's report:

General

The manuscript is now much improved. Among other, knowing the user rates allows putting the findings in context and shows that the overall use of health services is very low.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

My only remaining concern is the description of the study population in material and methods: I still think that a study population of 3905 allows stratifying for age and sex without running into the problem of small numbers. However, the proper description of the study is more important. There is no description in terms of age group and sex; even if not used for stratification, these key characteristics should be presented. This is also needed to compare the findings with similar studies. In the methodology there is nothing else than the statement “all patients during working hours as well as all emergencies…” later on it is stated that users of preventive services were not included except in case of “frank pathology”.

However, preventive services such as antenatal care and growth monitoring are, among others, geared towards detecting frank pathology such as severe anaemia, multiple gestation, malnutrition etc…..In fact, guidelines or decision trees for these services include very often the option of referral and could contribute significantly to the referral population. Usually preventive services will refer them without sending them back to the queue of curative services. This may be different in your setting, but should be clarified. E.g will a women who is referred because of severe anemia in pregnancy or multiple pregnancy appear in your study?

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests