Reviewer's report

Title: How are health professionals earning their living in Malawi?

Version: 1 Date: 13 June 2006

Reviewer: Leana Uys

Reviewer's report:

General
This is a topical article that brings new information to the brain drain debate. The data is well presented and interesting. The objectives of the research are clear.

I have a problem with the description of the methodology, since not enough information is given. The authors do not describe how they obtained permission for this research, and how they safe-guarded the identity of respondents. This is particularly significant, focus group and individual interviews does not allow for total anonymity of responses. The authors also do not describe how the groups were formed (Volunteers? Invited how?) or how the key informants were identified or chosen. The data collection and data analysis approaches are also not described. Were the groups tape recorded? Were they then transcribed? Were categories from the literature used for the analysis of data, or not?

The role played by the literature in the methodology is not clear to me. There are generally two approaches: some qualitative researchers like to do the data collection and analysis and then search the literature to validate the findings. Others do a literature search and use this as a framework for the data analysis. There are also other ways of dealing with the literature. In this study the use of the literature is not clear to me.

I find the themes identified by the authors confusing. In their initial summary of themes they name four (status and remuneration, working conditions, opportunities for further training and unfair recruiting). But when they then describe the results, these theme names are not used. This is very unusual for qualitative reporting. Theme names are very descriptive, and are usually closely linked to data and adhered to in reporting. This is especially confusing when the categories that follows seem to link directly to a theme, but it has a different name, e.g. status and remuneration vs inequitable salaries and recognition of experience.

I find the discussion section somewhat disappointing. In this section I would really expect more discussion of the implications of the study. For instance, what are the implications for international donors, for the professional bodies in the country, and for ministries in Malawi?

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
A comprehensive description of the methodology is essential, including addressing ethical issues. The use of the literature in the study should also be clarified.
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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)
The article should be carefully proof-read, so that mistakes such as pubic health system are eliminated.
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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
A more thorough discussion would be welcome.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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

Statistical review: No
Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.