Reviewer's report

Title: Access to electronic health knowledge in five countries in Africa: a descriptive study

Version: 1 Date: 10 April 2007

Reviewer: Harry McConnell

Reviewer's report:

General

The study is highly relevant and uses appropriate methods to answer these important questions. It confirms many informal anecdotal reports and represents a worthwhile contribution to the literature. The findings with respects to HINARE are particularly relevant and are important to convey as this is often discussed in informal circles and it is therefore critical to present the descriptive data and opinions in a qualitative study such as this. The further details described above could be provided as a separate addendum on line for those interested and would add to the credibility of the publication if provided. I recommend this paper for publication.

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

None

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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 methods are appropriate for a descriptive study. However, there are not sufficient details provided to replicate the work. In particular, the authors should describe in some detail (1) the semi-structured interview, (2) the basis for choosing these sites in particular, (3) the details of the thematic analysis of the qualitative data using methods of Framework approach and MAXqda software including an explanation of both the Framework approach and the Maxqda software which are both appropriate and recognized but need further clarification, (4) details of the entry into the database using DMSys and in particular the analysis done and specific details of the "predetermined analytical plan" and (5) the nature of the specific categorical variables between countries compared using chi-square tests and Fisher’s exact tests and the basis for the use of these tests.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

See additional comments below

ADDITIONAL REVIEWER COMMENTS

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?

The question is well defined and represents an important unanswered question in health care information services and knowledge management.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

The methods are appropriate for a descriptive study. However, there are not sufficient details provided to replicate the work. In particular, the authors should describe in some detail (1) the semi-structured interview, (2) the basis for choosing these sites in particular, (3) the details of the thematic analysis of the qualitative data using methods of Framework approach and MAXqda software including an explanation of both the Framework approach and the Maxqda software which are both appropriate and recognized but
need further clarification, (4) details of the entry into the database using DMsys and in particular the analysis done and specific details of the “predefined analytical plan” and (5) the nature of the specific categorical variables between countries compared using chi-square tests and Fisher’s exact tests and the basis for the use of these tests.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?

There is no control and insufficient description of the data. However, I recognize that this is a qualitative study and therefore it is not specifically indicated. However I would like to see a greater emphasis on the between country comparison findings and analysis of the differences. Comparison with less academic centers would also be of interest.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

Yes relevant standards are applied.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

Yes, as a qualitative study the discussions and conclusions appear appropriate. More discussion of the potential implications for information related development projects would be welcome.

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

yes

7. Is the writing acceptable?

yes, the writing is of acceptable standard.

Conclusion:

The study is highly relevant and uses appropriate methods to answer these important questions. It confirms many informal anecdotal reports and represents a worthwhile contribution to the literature. The findings with respects to HINARE are particularly relevant and are important to convey as this is often discussed in informal circles and it is therefore critical to present the descriptive data and opinions in a qualitative study such as this. The further details described above could be provided as a separate addendum on line for those interested and would add to the credibility of the publication if provided. I recommend this paper for publication.

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, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.