Reviewer's report

Title: Deficient supplies of drugs for life threatening diseases in an African community

Version: Date: 28 February 2007

Reviewer: Benjamin S. Chudi Uzochukwu

Reviewer's report:

General
The manuscript titled “Deficient supplies of drugs for Life threatening diseases in an African community is without doubt an important paper as it provides useful information on the state of drug supplies in Africa. However, the paper is not strong in its introduction and analysis. Therefore I feel it requires some changes and modifications in these areas before publication. Here are some suggestions for improvement:

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
1. Background
   a. The introduction is scanty without comparative background information on drug situation in other African and developing countries.
   b. Rumours and newspaper publications are not enough reasons to undertake the study. I believe if a proper literature review is done, better justification could be discerned.

2. Methods
   The specific study area is not described beyond naming it and stating the number of health centers.
   a. We need more in-depth description of the people, their population, occupation, language, religion, ethnic composition etc. How many districts are there in Malawi? Are there other public and public health facilities in Lilongwe that people can access essential drugs? If so, how are they distributed in the district?
   b. What is the overall design of the study and what hypothesis are being tested?

3. Data Collection
   I refer to the statement “The health center employees were very cooperative when interviewed about the ordering system…….”
   • What type of interview was conducted?
   • What type of instrument was used to collect the data from them? Was it an in-dept interview guide, an FGD guide or questionnaire?
   • What were the contents of the interview
   • How many health center employees were interviewed?

4. Data analysis
   • The authors need to analyse the health center employees’ interview
   • A major flaw in this paper is that a proper prescription analysis of the 8968 Patient Records containing information on types and amount of the drugs prescribed during the one month was not done.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
1. Background
   • Paragraph 2 of the background section, starting from “Thus, one of the authors (NNL) visited a random selection of health centers……………………………………………” should be moved to the methods section.

2. Discussion
   Paragraph 5 line 2 should read drugs and not drues

3. Conclusion
   Paragraph 2, 3rd sentence should be referenced

4. References
   References 6 and 7 should bear the date the web site was accessed.
Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
1. Selection of the index drugs
Are these the 8 most widely used drugs at the health centers? I am surprised

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**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'