Reviewer's report

Title: Health impact assessment and short-term medical missions: a methods study to evaluate quality of care

Version: 1 Date: 21 November 2007

Reviewer: James Rohrer

Reviewer's report:

General

This is first effort to create an objective evaluation tool for short-term medical missions. It uses a 360-degree approach.

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

none

Limitations of the tool should address some very real issues that could undermine its objectivity in application. Sources of bias include at least the following.

1. The authors mention that leadership demands self-evaluation, leaping over the reason why it is necessary to encourage leaders in this direction: i.e., leaders tend to emphasize the positive and minimize the negative in everything they do. They also want to protect their funding channels for future missions.

2. Missions have secondary benefits that will create positive response bias from participants. Involvement in the excitement and camaraderie of field work stimulates the participant emotionally, thus reducing objectivity. Boosting morale is a known benefit of encouraging staff to participate in missions. This is real and valuable but also is a source of bias in regard to objective assessment.

3. The authors are silent about how patient surveys can be administered so as to reduce positive response bias. As a result, the most enthusiastic will be asked to complete the form. If randomly selected, can anonymity be assured? How many patients should be surveyed to assure representativeness? Translation is mentioned in the paper, but what about patients who are illiterate in their own languages? And will clinic staff have time in the press of patient care to pull aside patients and administer surveys?

Objective assessment of clinical quality is not possible using this approach. The
authors may want to rethink their claims in this regard. Many readers will not accept the assumptions on this point as they currently are written.

The limitations of the tool cause me to wonder whether it should be used by independent evaluators instead of the mission leadership. The authors should consider this application of their work.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
P4. change “efficacy” to “effectiveness.”

What next?: Accept after discretionary 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'