Author's response to reviews

Title: Corruption in the health care sector: A barrier to access of orthopaedic care and medical devices in low-income countries

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To the editors of BMC International Health and Human Rights,

Thank you in advance for considering my manuscript. I am an orthopaedic surgery resident at the University of Toronto in Canada. This article exposes the role of corruption in the provision of orthopaedic health services as identified in the research I conducted in 2010 on the limited accessibility of orthopaedic medical devices in low-income countries. I hope that you will find it pertinent to your broad readership, and that its implications for directing global health policy and development in surgical care in low-income countries are compelling and deserving of publication.

Access to health care is considered a basic human right. Many papers highlighting the barriers to access of health care and surgical services describe the problems of poor health infrastructure and inadequate human resources. Few articles however, report on the important role of corruption in the health sector as an impediment to access of health services and in particular surgical and trauma care.

The global injury burden is severely underappreciated. Ninety percent of injury deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries. Injuries cause approximately as many deaths per year as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined. According to the WHO, road traffic crashes, a major cause of orthopaedic injury, are projected to be the third leading cause of long-term disability globally by the year 2030. Untreated orthopaedic injuries can result in permanent disability and mortality and thus have a significant impact on human and economic development.

Alleviating the burden of orthopaedic injuries requires timely access to appropriate orthopaedic care. As many orthopaedic procedures require an orthopaedic medical device, such as plaster, an external fixator or an implant, accessibility and availability of these devices are essential. In low-income countries however, orthopaedic services and medical devices are generally inadequate or unavailable, as the required expertise, infrastructure and funding are often lacking.

The descriptive qualitative case study of orthopaedic services in Uganda reported in this article is the first known study to address the issue of access to orthopaedic medical devices and its impact on the injury burden. As predicted limited human resources, inadequate health care infrastructure, and high costs of orthopaedic equipment were elicited as common barriers to access of orthopaedic medical devices. The most unexpected, yet significant, finding was that corruption and poor leadership in government were considered as major impediments to access of orthopaedic care and medical devices. Corruption was perceived to occur at the worker, hospital and government levels in the forms of misappropriation of funds, theft of equipment, resale of drugs and medical devices, absenteeism and fraud.

As the burden of injury continues to grow, the need to combat corruption and ensure access to orthopaedic services is imperative. Anti-corruption strategies employed in other
areas of the health sector, such as transparency and accountability measures, codes of conduct, whistleblower protection, and higher wages and benefits for workers, are explored in this article. These mechanisms could be important initial steps in improving access orthopaedic care and OMDs and managing the global injury burden.

Corruption in the health care sector has been repeatedly shown to hinder access to needed health services. As shown in this article, this is no exception for orthopaedic and trauma care in low-income countries where corruption is perceived as one of the largest barriers to access of much needed surgical services. This study promotes further scientific and policy inquiry into the issue of corruption in the health sector and access to orthopaedic services and equipment globally as part of the response to alleviating the injury burden.

I sincerely hope you consider this manuscript important and relevant, and recommend it for publication in BMC International Health and Human Rights.

Thank you in advance,

Kind Regards,

Maryse Bouchard, MD, MSc Candidate

References