Reviewer's report

Title: Syphilis screening in the antenatal care: a cross-sectional study from Botswana

Version: 1 Date: 18 April 2006

Reviewer: Ornella Lincetto

Reviewer's report:

General
1. The manuscript addresses an important topic, the prevalence of syphilis among pregnant women and the challenges that antenatal care programs are facing in order to identify and manage positive cases, and ultimately to effectively prevent congenital syphilis. Similar problems have been documented by other authors in African countries. However, to make the data more relevant to programs the authors should focus more on missed opportunities, which seem to be: a) women not screened at the first antenatal care visit; b) women not retested at the second antenatal care visit (both those who had not been tested at the first visit and those who according to the national policy were supposed to be tested again); c) women who tested positively and were not treated.

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

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
2. Key words: "prenatal"; however, this word was never used in the manuscript, "antenatal" was used instead.
3. Abstract: add to methods the information on number of health facilities and location, as the data provided by the manuscript cannot be generalized to whole Botswana.
4. Background: it may be more correct to mention that the target population of the study is mainly urban, as there are differences in population and services in urban and rural settings.
5. Methods: the sampling method is not fully clear, was it a consecutive sample or a convenience sample? If it was a proportionate sample, which proportion of pregnant women was included?
6. Methods: in relation to venous blood samples, specify in the text if these were taken from all women (not only the repeat visits) and if these were done in addition to routine care. In practice, should it be assumed that RPR was done twice in some women (as part of routine care and for the study)?
7. Results: specify how many women with STI symptoms were coming for the first visit.
8. Results: specify if the 71 women (13%) not screened in the antenatal program, refer to the first visits or both first and repeat visits.
9. Results: specify if the 14 (3%) women found positive at the screening were 3% of total or 3% of repeat visits only.
10. In general, when "routine antenatal care" is mentioned it is not fully clear if the authors mean only the policy of testing at the first antenatal visit or the policy of testing at the first visit and retesting at subsequent visits.
11. Discussion: in terms of policy recommendations, consider to add the importance of intensifying efforts where needs are higher (rural areas) and, as mentioned in the general comments, how to address missed opportunities.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
12. The authors may consider to provide more information on the missed opportunities, for example why women were not retested at the repeat antenatal visits despite a national policy recommending retesting.
13. Some information on perinatal outcomes would be interesting, if available.

**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.