Reviewer’s report

Title: Barriers to the effective treatment and prevention of malaria in Africa: A systematic review of qualitative studies

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Reviewer: James Thomas

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Review of: Barriers to the effective treatment and prevention of malaria in Africa: A systematic review of qualitative studies

Thank you for inviting me to review this paper. I found it interesting to read, with a clear narrative style that avoided unnecessary jargon. Please note that I have limited experience of research in malaria and am reviewing the paper as an expert in systematic reviewing (of both qualitative and quantitative studies) rather than as a topic area expert.

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

1. Why did the authors only search Medline? I am not sure that this is the best source for identifying African research – in my own (limited) experience of working in HIV prevention in South Africa, we went to considerable lengths to find local research. We have also found that qualitative research is particularly difficult to find for our own systematic reviews, and have to search extensively in order to identify relevant studies. There are numerous other electronic databases that could be searched (e.g. some of the trials in the African Trials Registry may have qualitative components), and Google (and Google Scholar) is a useful source of material – including grey literature – that is not necessarily well indexed elsewhere. Reviewers also commonly write to all the authors of included studies, people working in the field and key organisations while searching as well as looking at research registers and the websites of key organisations. I think it is likely that there are many more relevant studies that this review has not identified. While the authors acknowledge in the discussion that the limited search may be a limitation, I think this should be stronger, and that it should also be acknowledged in the methods and a justification given for the search selected.

In a synthesis of qualitative studies, there is not a necessity to find every relevant study (as is the case in a meta-analysis), since we are interested conceptual rather than statistical comprehensiveness. The limited search may therefore not necessarily weaken the review’s reliability, but I think it is fair to say that we don’t know whether a more extensive search would have simply found more studies that say the same thing, or a set of studies that shed an entirely new light on the subject.

2. I found it difficult to jump into the search strategy (p.4) without having a good
idea of the scope of the review. I understood that it was concerned with local understandings of malaria, and the barriers to treatment, but the terms “referral and consultation” etc came as a surprise. I would suggest that a section before the methods on the scope and aims of the review would be a better way into the study for the reader. While not all reviews of qualitative research have explicit review questions, I feel that the reader would be assisted by a statement of the review question in this case.

3. I think we also need a clear statement of the inclusion / exclusion criteria of the review. While some of this detail is in the ‘selection of abstracts’, the fact that these criteria are not presented as a list suggests that there may be other criteria that the reader does not know about (e.g. did the studies have to be written in English?).

4. The population of interest also needs a clearer description. Studies that ‘focused on either travelers, or malaria in pregnancy’ were singled out for exclusion, but I wasn’t sure why.

5. Equally, I wasn’t sure why experimental studies were excluded. More clarity about the scope of the review is needed. (In the discussion it says that ‘there were limited data in the included studies by which to assess the rigor of the experimental methods used...’ – presumably this is an error?)

6. I think the search strategy should be given in full in an appendix. It was difficult to assess the search from the details given. 259 articles is relatively few to retrieve from a Medline search, so I would wonder whether relevant studies were missed. I thought the review of key references described ‘citation chasing’ – looking through the reference lists of included studies. The discussion suggests it was something else, so I think this needs more clarity too.

7. I wasn’t sure what the purpose of the quality assessment component of the review was. The CASP checklist is well-known and is a good tool (though there are more in-depth tools available), but why was it used, and what impact did it have on the review? As far as I can see, no studies were excluded on the basis of their quality and quality was not an issue that was explored in the synthesis. Details of how the studies scored on the checklist are also not given in the tables (though Table 3 contains information about reporting). The quality assessment process needs to be written up more clearly: why it was done, what impact it had on the review and what were its results?

8. I also wasn’t sure why the interesting discussion (which was a bit limited, but is picked up later) about the use of local terminology was in the same paragraph as the statement about the quality assessment tool.

9. The methods of synthesis are quite sketchy, and you find out more about them in the discussion. At the least, reference 38 should be cited as the source of the methods used.

10. The authors don’t discuss the findings of their review in relation to any others in the field. Is this the only review of this topic? If so, it should say so.
- Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

1. I thought the description of the procedure used to extract themes was clear. I was less clear what the ‘scoring checklist’ was, however. Is this table four? I also wondered why a third author categorised the themes on behalf of the other two. Weren’t the two authors best placed to categorise them themselves? The authors do not reference any of the growing literature on methods for synthesising qualitative research, but appear to have developed their own method based on their own research practices (or adopted one mentioned in reference 38). I would have liked to read more about how they conducted the synthesis, and how their methods compared to others (For a recent overview please see http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/690/), but can see that this may be of less interest to many readers.

2. I would have liked to see a clear definition of what a ‘qualitative’ study is. This is a frequently contested term (does it simply mean unstructured data collection, or does it also represent a particular epistemology?) and not one that is always straightforward to apply in practice.

3. I wondered whether equal weight was given to all themes, or whether themes that occurred in many studies were considered to be more important than others. Given the limited search, I would be hesitant about placing too much importance about the frequency with which themes were reported. (In which case, does it really matter that x studies reported this and y studies reported that?)

4. I would have liked to see more detail in the findings section, and a little more signposting to the themes (subheadings or bold text to indicate each theme). While the authors say ‘findings should be interpreted and applied on a case-by-case basis according to the cultural context of a particular region’ they don’t help readers in the text to do this (though the tables are clear). They also break down the tables according to population, but present the results as a homogenous entity.

**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