Reviewer’s report

Title: Future career plans of Malawian medical students: a cross-sectional survey

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Reviewer: Ivana Kolcic

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This is a very interesting paper dealing with burning issues of human resources in health care provision in the setting of Malawi. However, the weakest part of manuscript is the lack of statistical analysis description. Also, authors sometimes make conclusions beyond results (see the following points). Still, this is a well written report, and if authors manage to amend following issues, I recommend this paper for publication in Human Resources for Health (Major Compulsory Revisions).

ABSTRACT
1. Pre-service training of doctors – not clear what this is
2. Work or train abroad – not exactly the same. Do the students who wish to train abroad plan to go back to Malawi and practice medicine there?
3. Give a brief overview of the main sections of the questionnaire.
4. Add the response rate
5. Statistical analysis – specify which regression analysis was used! Note: no results of regression analysis can be found anywhere in the paper!
6. a trend test - ? which one, it was not mentioned in the Statistical analysis section
7. Public sector was mentioned – is there a private one?
8. A-level – additionally explain for less informed readers
9. Keywords: retention – a bit unusual, add Malawi to Keyword list

BACKGROUND
1. “Reasons include a chronic underproduction of trained personnel and out-migration, both from the public sector and internationally [7].” – confusing end of the sentence
2. Describe the educational system in Malawi in greater details for international readers, as well as the training for medical doctors (how many medical schools, training for obtaining a specialty, i.e. gynecology)
3. Describe the health care system in brief – I had an impression of public health sector vs. private – is this true, and if so – why?
METHODS
1. Details on statistical analyses are lacking – which statistical tests were used
2. Focus group – how large was it?
3. Postgraduate training – explain in more details what this is (clinically or research oriented?)

RESULTS
1. „Figure 3 compares the 2008 population densities for each district [15] to the percentage of students who indicated that district as their district of origin.“ – a bit strange sentence formulation, please rephrase
2. „As graduates must complete 18 months of internship before registration with the Medical Council of Malawi [13], these students may not intend to return to Malawi afterwards“ – since there was no specific question about this issue, this statement is conclusion beyond the results
3. „If the service and training options are combined,“…- is the service actually practicing medicine?
4. „Medical students who completed the premedical year were significantly more likely to have immediate plans to stay in Malawi compared to those who completed A-levels (Fisher’s exact test, p = 0.037), but not BSc (#2 = 0.147, p = 0.70).“ – please give percentages

DISCUSSION
1. „Nearly 40% of medical students who responded to this survey plan to leave Malawi after graduation.“ – this is a bit too strong conclusion, since it is based on a single point in time, it is merely based on a current situation and thinking of young people, who can still reconsider their wishes. This results implies that …
2. Low response in 4-5 year of studies – try to explain why
3. Is there any information in the literature from countries which employ doctors form Malawi?

Recommendation for furthers studies – investigate into reasons for leaving Malawi and training somewhere else, and where

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.