Reviewer's report

Title: Health worker perspectives on user fee removal in Zambia

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Reviewer: Loveday Penn-Kekana

Reviewer's report:

Overall I thought this was a well-written and interesting article that addressed an important policy question and was refreshingly honest about the methodology challenges of doing this kind of research, and the difficulties of interpreting the results.

As the authors clearly state, and take account of in their discussion and conclusion, while the methods were the best that could be done in the circumstances, the circumstances meant that they do not have the data to conclusively comment on health worker perspectives on user fees, as so much else was happening in the part of the Zambian health system that they were researching at the same time that it is hard to separate out the impact of user fee removal and other changes.

My one small methodological question was why the interviews were not recorded – and instead notes were taken. Was there some reason for this as I think that taped interviews are generally a better way of ensuring that what the interviewee said is accurately recorded.

It was a pity, but understandable if you know the context in which they were working, that there was not reliable utilisation data available to see if workload really increased. The use of the data from the over all study assisted with setting the context. I just wondered where broader study obtained its utilization data from – was it consolidated data from facilities or did they collect their own data. If it was consolidated facility data was it from the same area where the facility level was shown to be poor quality? If it was there own data why didn’t they collect such data in the facilities visited for this study?

It has been my experience working in other countries that nurses always complain about workload but that actually workload varies considerably – and often the workload is concentrated in the morning. I wondered what the authors’ impressions where when they visited the facilities and if there is any way this could at least be noted in the article.

I thought the discussion and conclusion was well written, and supported by the results. It was also clear that the authors new the literature on the topic and had fairly discussed it.

I thought the finding that health care workers got satisfaction from now being able to provide services to the poor, and the perception that patients were seeking
help before their conditions got serious, were interesting ones and important one
to take into consideration alongside the often stated concerns about increased
workload, and concern patients would abuse the system.

The article contributes to the body of work on user fees as well as gives useful
insights on how difficult it is to evaluate the impact of isolated policies. I suggest
that the article should be published with minor discretionary revisions.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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

Declaration of competing interests:

I work in a part time capacity for the same institution where the authors of this
paper are based but I do not and have never worked on this particular DFID
project.