Reviewer's report

Title: Health worker perspectives on user fee removal in Zambia

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Reviewer: Marsha Sarah Orgill

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MS ID: 1244187238673517
Title: Health worker perspectives on user fee removal in Zambia
Authors: Barbara Carasso, Mylene Lagarde, Caesar Cheelo, Collins Chansa and Natasha Palmer

General comments

The paper is well suited to the journal Human Resources for Health as the journal “encourages debate on health sector reforms and their link with human resources issues”, and the paper clearly speaks to these issues.

The title and abstract both adequately convey what has been found and the writing and quality of the written English is acceptable.

The selection of study sites was adequately described.

Please note, I have not personally used principal component analysis and therefore cannot fully judge the technical appropriateness of this analysis. You will need to have another reviewer do this. I do, however, feel able to judge the relevance of the PCA findings in the context of the rest of the paper.

I have reviewed the rest of the paper in full.

What the study sought to do is well captured and explained. I think the paper helps us further understand barriers to implementing successful health financing reforms, in the literature on user fees there is a recognised need for research to understand the relationship between policy formulation and policy implementation in addressing barriers to access to health care (Meesen, Hercot, Noirhomme et al, 2011). There are, however, as mentioned in the paper, limits on the conclusions that can be drawn from the research. Overall I found the paper acceptable for publication after the revisions are looked at.

I have 2 minor essential revisions and the rest are discretionary revisions:

Minor essential revisions:
Comment 1: Table 2

One concern is that a fuller explanation of how the sets of questions in Table 2 were selected needs to be given to the reader as these questions are central to the research and to the conclusions drawn in the paper. If possible also discuss the pros and cons of using these questions.

Comment 2: Background section, paragraph 6
The second objective “it explores the views of health workers on how the policy change has affected their situation”. I think the term ‘situation’ is too open for interpretation. I think it should be clear what situation you are talking about, for example is it their working practices? Is it their self-esteem? Is it their clinical environment?

Discretionary Revisions:

Comment 3: Methods section, paragraph 5
“During in-depth interviews conducted with senior or longer serving staff at each facility, general questions were asked to gather background information about the facility. Furthermore, their perception on issues affecting the different cadres of health workers in the context of the abolition of user fees were documented”. I think it would be good if you provided more details of the actual questions asked to elicit the information so the reader understands what was asked.

Possibly explain who these “senior or longer serving staff” are in the context of the paper. Are they the same people who also filled in the self-administered questionnaire? Are they the health workers that are being focused on or are they just general staff giving their perceptions of the different cadres of health workers in the context of the abolition of user fees? The characteristics of the respondents who filled in the questionnaire are shown on Table 3; however the characteristics of the interview respondents are not given.

Comment 4: self-reported job satisfaction section
I think there would be value in seeking to explain the quantitative data more, using the qualitative data and other forms of interpretation in this section.

Comment 5: Table 1
In Table 1 I think it could be made clear whether all mission facilities in the country are non-charging facilities or whether it was the case that the sample had only mission facilities that were non-charging. I think this is important as you note on page 11 that “If staff working in mission facilities are excluded from the analysis, the difference [in levels of satisfaction] between charging and non-charging (government) facilities disappears”.

Perhaps in the section titled self-reported job satisfaction you could discuss what this might mean for future analyses that try to understand health worker perspectives and motivations in countries with diversity in health provision (such as in this paper the presence of missionary facilities and government facilities in Zambia). Would you conclude that the presence of religious/culturally rooted facilities matters for future work in this area? In which way? I think your insight on this after doing this research will be valuable to the reader.

Minor issues not for publication (as noted by the journal, these are issues that can be removed from the review once addressed)

Comment 6: Methods section: 4th paragraph and Table 2
It reads: “In addition to questions capturing their basic descriptive characteristics the self-administered questionnaire contained questions where respondents had to give their level of agreement or satisfaction (on a 5 point likert scale) with a
series of statements relating to various dimensions of job satisfaction (quantitative section, see Table 2).”

But your Table 2 heading is “Different domains of motivation assessed in the questionnaire” …. Should table 2 not be called “dimensions of job satisfaction”? As this is how you refer to it in the paragraph on page 7.

Comment 7: Paragraph 4

It is noted at the bottom of page 7 that a preliminary pilot study helped to ensure that the wording made sense in the Zambian context, do you have any comments on this? Were any substantial changes made to your tools as a result of the pilot that might be interesting for the reader to know?

Comment 8: Contextual factors section: 2nd paragraph

The sentence “Ten percent of the revenue raised from fees was reserved for salary top-ups, whereas the rest was used to purchase basic material for the health facility, to hire additional staff (classified daily employees, CDEs or to finance community activities”.

As it is mentioned later (p.14), this salary top-up was only made in some districts, perhaps you could make this clear in this paragraph above so that the reader does not assume from this paragraph that all facilities in Zambia pay salary top-ups.

Comment 9: Table 3

Write out the word CDE in full.

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

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare I have no competing interests.