Reviewer's report

Title: Placement, support, and retention of health professionals: National, cross-sectional findings from medical and dental community service officers in South Africa

Version: 1 Date: 2 October 2013

Reviewer: Gilles Dussault

Reviewer's report:

This paper addresses the perceptions of health professionals of compulsory community service, an important but little documented topic. It can provide an interesting case study, but still needs some work before being accepted for publication.

Major compulsory revisions:

1- P.4-5: The Community service programme should described in sufficient detail for the reader to understand the context. There is no mention of nurses: are they excluded from the programme, why?

2- P. 5: what is “programme theory”? The a. seem to refer to programme evaluation, in which case they need to explain how it contributed to structure their research and to guide their methodological choices. They pass from Background to Methods without presenting a conceptual framework which would justify their objectives and research strategy.

3- P.7: The survey population needs to be described here. Is this information available in Table 1 under Total Number? If so, this has to be made clear. The representatively of the population of respondents should be better discussed and explanations for the no-responses should be given.

4- The Results section reads like a report. To keep the attention of readers, the authors should synthesize and take out ORs and CIs as these are available in attached tables. The focus should be on future intentions and their determinants.

5- Table 3:: indicate non-responses (for ex. Level of facility –which should be type of facility- there are only 400 responses)

Minor essential revisions:

p.2: “Rates of self-reported professional development in this sample were high (n=470, 87%)”. Check what is the numerator (87% of what?)

p.4: “World Health Organisation has launched a programme of work to increase access to health workers in remote and rural areas through improved retention”. There is no such programme of work. WHO only issued recommendations.

p.9: If 55% of participants had been placed in rural facilities, how comes that “Ten percent of community service officers were allocated to community health centres or clinics” ? One would expect that most rural facilities would be health
centers.

p. 18: what does “Rural placement by participant choice was viewed as undesirable within this sample” mean?

p. 19: what does “the presence of a satisfactory staff” mean?

p. 21: Check the last sentence, which is difficult to understand as it is.

P.22: The limitations should come in the methods section as an alert to the reader before presenting the results.

p. 27: Check reference 17 which is incorrect (volume 23?, 3-69?)

**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 that I have no competing interests’