Reviewer's report

Title: Working practices and incomes of health workers: evidence from an evaluation of a delivery exemption scheme in Ghana

Version: 2 Date: 27 October 2006

Reviewer: Barbara Isobel McPake

Reviewer's report:

General

Although it seems this paper is on a second draft and I have not seen it before, overall I think it still needs more work before publication.

My main general concern is that the paper is only partially an evaluation of the exemption scheme, and partially a more general description of working conditions, productivity and so on, of maternal health workers. The extent to which anything that is discussed – even the increased workload estimated – has any connection to the exemption scheme is either judged rather vaguely (‘are likely to be related to the scheme, at least in part’) or not judged at all. It might work better to locate this paper in the discussion of brain drain from Ghana than to seek to deal with the exemption scheme at all. The extent to which Ghanaian maternal health workers are well paid (and a monetary as opposed to quality of living comparison with health workers in the North is really not that relevant, I don’t think), is a rather striking feature of the data presented.

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

There seems to me a glaring gap in the discussion, in acknowledgement of the limitations and biases of self-reported data. For example, a general bias of presenting oneself in a good light may have led to: over-estimation of working hours; under-estimation of external activities; greater than felt motivation by serving the community; greater workload estimates etc. There are well known difficulties in determining income and expenditure estimates by self-report and these are not discussed in general or in relation to the apparent (typical) discrepancies in these estimates obtained. There may also be biases in comparing self-reports across groups. If choosing to present oneself in a good light is relatively sophisticated thinking, that might explain why TBAs were more likely to own to monetary motivation than the other more educated groups. All this needs significant space in the discussion.

Relatedly, there would seem to be ways of estimating the extent of these biases in some variables, for example by comparing with data from the other evaluation paper that has (I think) measured utilisation outcomes, and in other respect by comparison with available (for example health facility) records. This would greatly bolster the conclusions.

Method detail is missing in critical aspects. The nature of the questionnaire is not explained, other that that it was ‘structured’. I assume, from other parts of the text, there were both closed and open-ended questions. More information about how critical questions were asked is needed. I’ve already mentioned income and expenditure. How the issue of ‘sustainability’ emerged is not clear. I suspect it is not a commonly used idea by ordinary health workers. The issues of translation are also not addressed. I imagine that the formal health workers speak English, but is this also true of the TBAs? Whether other sources of information have been used for any of the results reported is not mentioned if applicable. Analytic procedures for open-ended questions require some explanation.

Finally, if the focus is to remain the exemption programme, more information is needed about the problem the programme was supposed to address. Although reference is made to a UNFPA/MoH report arguing that fees were a major barrier to uptake, more justification is required, especially as that is not a widely available publication. What were the fee levels (perhaps relative to other relevant items)? What was the evidence that they were a major barrier to uptake? A summary of the other evaluation’s conclusions on utilisation response might also help to convince.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author
There are quite a lot of definitions that would be helpful at the outset, and points of clarification needed throughout the paper.

Even in the title ‘delivery fee exemption’ might be clearer than ‘delivery exemption’, and further explanation should be provided in the abstract and in the first mention in the text.

‘Focal districts’ are not defined. Are they the same as ‘sampled districts’ or is something more implied?

What is the unit of client load? If it is a mixed bag of client contacts ranging from routine ante-natal visit to delivery, the limitations of counting each type of contact as equivalent should be discussed.

Presumably, the life time risk cited on p2 (actual page numbers would have been helpful) is of dying from childbirth related causes, and it applies to 1 in 7 women.

What is the definition of medical practitioner in the same paragraph? Is it what is elsewhere referred to as a skilled birth attendant (for which there are also definitional differences across countries and more explanation therefore required), or are you referring to a more limited range of cadres?

Was there concern that the delivery fee exemption scheme would reduce health workers’ income? This concern seems suggested by the focus of the evaluation, but not included in the description of concerns at the foot of p2.

What definition did you use for a household? This is relevant to comparisons of external dependents.

How were savings and borrowings taken into account in the calculation of revenue? If net borrowing is significantly different from zero across the whole group, some explanation is needed. Did you take into account making repayment of loans, lending, and receiving repayment of previous loans? My impression from another African country is that people tend to explain the difference between expenditure and income as ‘borrowing’ whereas that makes no sense if by ‘borrowing’ is meant what we understand in the UK by that. It may mask a reluctance to reveal the true source of additional income, or it may be that ‘borrowing’ is a face-saving way of describing receiving subsidy from extended family, where no-one expects repayment. Further discussion would be interesting if that seems applicable.

On page 5 you report changes to numbers of deliveries over the past 2 years. Was this the period over which the exemption scheme was introduced? This could be clearer.

Under income, the first paragraph needs to be reconciled by explanation of the difference from the earlier reported income figures. Why are you reporting income data in two places?

What is the implication of TBAs reporting that they received delivery exemption allowances? If I’ve understood correctly, they are not supposed to, and this therefore requires some discussion.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

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: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.