Reviewer's report

Title: Professional training for community health care and retention in rural medical practice in Mali: a participatory action research

Version: 1 Date: 28 May 2008

Reviewer: Tim Martineau

Reviewer's report:

Please make your report as constructive and detailed as possible in your comments so that authors have the opportunity to overcome any serious deficiencies that you find and please also divide your comments into the following categories:

General comments

The staffing of remote health facilities in most countries is problematic, particularly regarding highly skilled health personnel such as doctors. This paper describes a practical approach to addressing these staffing shortages with some useful and interesting field data. It is therefore potentially a welcome contribution to the literature on this topic. However, at the moment the paper lacks a clear focus, is too descriptive and does not draw any useful conclusions to contribute to the debate on the staffing of remote health facilities.

There are several aspects of the paper that need to be addressed. First, a clarification of the actual problem being addressed by this article (rather than the action research programme in general) and the related research questions are required. Second, the paper needs more theoretical support to the central hypothesis being put forward. Once these first two points have been clarified, the third step will be to describe the methods used to address the specific research questions and related objectives. Having done this it will be much easier to be selective about what results to present and develop a focused discussion and conclusion.

The following is a suggestion for the focus and re-structuring of this background and methods sections of this article for consideration by the authors:

The problem in Mali – as in many countries – is the staffing of remote health facilities. Turnover is high for most cadres (use data from p14), though since relatively recently it has been possible to attract doctors due to the provision of special incentives and the current state of the labour market for doctors (this needs more explanation). The greater concern in Mali is how to retain doctors in remote facilities.

Of the push and pull factors that determine people’s decision whether to stay or not, job satisfaction is important particularly amongst professional staff and in the caring professions. Job satisfaction is based on a number of factors which include being able to carry out the job effectively and in service-related jobs having good
relations with the public. This is particularly important in remoter, less populated areas. (references needed to support this section)

Earlier studies in Mali indicated that “doctors often experienced difficult and unexpected situations” that could very probably affect the level of job satisfaction of the young doctors and may contribute to their decisions not to stay. To compensate for the inadequate preparation of doctors in their medical training, an orientation course, based on a realistic training needs assessment, was developed.

A simple evaluation of the impact of the training on retention is not possible for two reasons. First, the lack of baseline data. Second, the problem of attribution and the recognition that other factors – such as follow-up supervision and support – may contribute to improve levels of retention. However, using Kirkpatrick’s four levels of evaluation of training, data can be collected on reaction (level 1), learning (level 2) and possibly behaviour (level 3) through follow up visits. Based on the assumption that job satisfaction is an important factor in retention and that improved orientation and skills result in higher levels of job satisfaction, it would be reasonable to say that a positive result at levels 1 to 3 in Kirkpatrick’s framework, provided that the training needs assessment was accurate, will contribute to improved levels of retention.

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

The paper needs a cleared focus. A clearer statement of the specific problem covered by this paper is needed and related research questions. A more precise description of the methods related the research questions should be provided. The results and discussion sections will then need to be revised.

- Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

To be reviewed on re-submission.

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

Declaration of competing interests:

'I declare that I have no competing interests'