Reviewer's report

Title: Voices from the frontline: Supervising infant feeding community peer counsellors in South Africa, a qualitative study

Version: 1 Date: 13 May 2009

Reviewer: ann hill

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Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Abstract: careful revision is required as several statements are stronger than is warranted and could be considered misleading. For example the statement that the ‘paper reports on the supervision and support of CHWs...’ is questionable as few details (such as frequency/duration of observations, on-the-job training) are actually presented in the main text.

The number of respondents must be stated in the Abstract.

2. Appropriateness of methods: Three supervisors, one from each site, were each interviewed once. Thus the sample is exceedingly small, and cannot be expected to provide anything more than a flavour. No robust conclusions are possible.

Important details need to be added. It is not clear if these are the only supervisors employed on the project. If there are others, then the process of selecting these three for inclusion should be stated. The duration of the interview should also be specified.

3. Description of the training: Supervisors received ‘some attention to the supervision process’, which implies that training for their supervisory role was minimal, both in content and duration. This needs to be clarified as it might explain the individualistic and varied approach to supervision shown by the three supervisors.

In planning home-visiting intervention programmes, one should prepare frontline workers during their basic training for difficult, disturbing or dangerous situations which they may encounter. It is not clear if this was done during the training of the counsellors, and whether supervisors participated. If it was not done, might it have been helpful in hindsight?

4. Interpretation and conclusions: One has the impression that the supervisors were diligent but the context is rather abstract as there is no indication as to whether they performed as expected, or whether the workload was manageable, or if the peer counsellors felt adequately supported. The supervisors tended to function idiosyncratically, but it is unclear whether this was encouraged, or reflects a weakness in their training or in the managerial system.
A distinction must be made between what was expected of the supervisors (was this technical supervision alone?) and what was found to be needed.

Careful revision of the discussion is required – it is rather repetitive and weak, and the key lessons seem poorly founded, as there is no evidence that the supervision was adequate. No external facilitating factors have been identified – were these probed? (All appear to be personal traits).

The conclusions need to be more specifically related to the findings from the interviews.

Minor Essential Revisions:
p2: CHWs (not CHW’s)
p4: 1980s (not 1980’s)
p4: health promotion, disease prevention (not health promotion, prevention)
p6: facilitating factors (not facilitators)
p6: remove superscript 2

Discretionary Revisions:
Improve syntax and punctuation

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

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.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.