Author's response to reviews

Title: Male circumcision for HIV prevention: research incorporating science, faith and culture in Papua New Guinea.

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Editor,

Please find a table below with authors’ responses to the two reviews of the manuscript titled “Male circumcision for HIV prevention: research incorporating science, faith and culture in Papua New Guinea.” I have attached an updated and fully revised manuscript in MS Word. All changes are evident in ‘track changes’.

Thank you for the opportunity to revise and re-submit this abstract to your journal.
Best Wishes
David MacLaren
Corresponding Author

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reviewers comment</th>
<th>Authors’ Response</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reviewer 1:</strong></td>
<td>We thank the reviewer for their positive overview and for highlighting the importance of the paper.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The research question is well defined and addresses an important aspect of cross-cultural research in exploring the acceptability of undertaking sensitive studies with young adults. Although only covering a pilot study set up prior to a full investigation, the paper constructively attempts to reveal the pitfalls, barriers and enablers that allow this difficult yet essential type of research to be completed successfully. Since HIV prevention to be effective must deal with sexual issues and therefore confront cultural practices in this low resourced country that people may be uncomfortable discussing, a paper revealing the detailed process of doing so has potential to provide a lot of learning for other researchers in similar localities and health concerns. Here the authors have trouble in deciding the extent to which they are addressing the results of the pilot study or describing the responses from key informants regarding the acceptability of the approaches used, in other words, the authors must decide whether to report on the process and its constraints or the findings from all three data sources and adjust the paper accordingly.. The questionnaire responses are reported but there is no reporting of the personal beliefs and opinions of the interviewees or the group discussion participants – and these would be likely to throw more light on the research question posed at the beginning of the paper, as well as the sub-questions listed on page 7.</td>
<td>Both Reviewer 1 and Reviewer 2 highlight the need to adjust the paper to focus on either (i) the actual findings from the data sources or (ii) report on the process of the study and responses from key informants about the acceptability of the approaches used. The authors thank the reviewers and have substantially edited the manuscript to be consistent with option (ii) – reporting the process of the study and responses from key informants about the acceptability of the approaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The table is useful but should be referred to in the text as well if it is to contribute well to the results.</td>
<td>Data from the table has been inserted as text in the results section.</td>
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</table>
The Discussion section begins with quite a few paragraphs informing the reader of ‘the Melanesian Way’ which seems to be compiled from the relevant literature and personal experience rather than an interpretation arising from the results.

Are the methods appropriate and well described? The authors do this very well, making clear the challenges they faced and responded to in this cross-cultural setting.

There are some definite improvements needed in the organisation of material, as follows:
- The Background first paragraph reads like the abstract which is inappropriate. This information usually comes at the end of the Background section immediately before the method.
- The last sentence in the Background section belongs in the Discussion.
- The last sentence of the Method section mentions a ‘demand’ but what this is is very unclear.
- The sentence towards the end of the Results telling us that detailed results are reported elsewhere is totally confusing in clarifying the purpose of the paper – either this paper should be a published report of the results following the unpublished reports elsewhere or this paper should focus on the process learnings rather than the direct pilot findings.

**Reviewer 2:**
Major Compulsory Revisions

Given the substantial editing of the manuscript, this section has been moved to the background section and stated as the ‘standpoint’ from which the research team approached the study. We believe this is the appropriate location for this material given the emphasis on the research process.

We thank the reviewer for these positive comments.

- First paragraph restructured with relevant sentences shifted to the last paragraph in the background section
- Sentence removed from background and modified for the discussion (now 2nd last paragraph in discussion)
- Sentence removed from the ‘method’ section, clarified and included as last paragraph in ‘results’ section
- Given the focus of the edited manuscript on the process learnings of the study rather than direct pilot findings this sentence has been removed.

We thank the reviewer for the considered review and helpful comments to improve the manuscript. Like Reviewer 1, Reviewer 2 highlighted that the main focus of the manuscript was the process of the study. We have therefore substantially edited the manuscript to remove any reference to the direct findings of the study. This enables the main focus of the paper (description of a culturally informed research process and lessons learned from that process) to be emphasised in the revised manuscript. Many of the comments from reviewer 2 highlighted issues relevant to the description, analysis and discussion of the direct findings of this study. Given the revised manuscript no longer contains direct findings – but emphasises the process of the study, only comments relevant to the revised manuscript will be addressed here.
1. Abstract. Research question and the objective(s) of the study should be included in the abstract. There is no mention of the study sample to make sense of the responses reported.

2. Research Question
Clearly link the research question with the study objectives.

3. Research Methods
The methods used in the study are appropriate but they were not well described. There are no justifications provided for selecting the methods for the study. The distinction between the methods and the process used to answer the research question is not clearly shown.

4. Study Sample
There is no description of the study population and the study sample.

5. Results
Description of the Response rate is provided but responses to questions in the questionnaire is limited to circumcision and forms of cuts. The discussion centered on the research process. No indication of the cultural background of the participants. Which cultures were represented in the study?

6. Research Process
The main focus of the paper is on the process of the study. There are appropriate words that should have been used in the paper (e.g. consultation, dissemination, collaborative research & research assistants). The term partnership should not be used.

Given the manuscript’s focus is now clearly on the description of the culturally informed research process and lessons learned from research partners we believe the second sentence of the abstract clearly articulates the purpose of the paper “Here we share a detailed description of culturally informed research processes and lessons learned from the first ever study undertaken on male circumcision for HIV prevention at a faith-based university in PNG”.

Edited manuscript now clearly links the purpose of the paper to the description of the culturally informed research process and lessons learned from the research process.

Edited manuscript now clearly links the purpose of the paper to the description of the culturally informed research process and lessons learned from the research process. The participants in the study are briefly described in the first paragraph of the results section.

We thank the reviewer for highlighting that the research process is the central discussion point of this paper. As such, the cultural background of the participants is described as being from one of the 4 regional groups in Papua New Guinea. Given this was the established ‘cultural identity’ that was utilised in this study process we believe that we have adequately described how cultures were represented (and embedded) in with study. A further description of provincial, language or tribal affiliation of individual participants would add complexity to the paper and distract from the established cultural groups that the study worked with.

With due respect, we believe that that makes this study new and different is that we use de-colonising methodologies that challenge established hierarchies such as using student leaders as ‘research assistants’ who merely
apply to student leaders. They were more or less research assistants. The considerations taken in this study is standard for other social research of sensitive nature in the country. What is new and how is it different?

7. Title
The title suggests two main components to the study: Male circumcision for HIV Prevention and how the research incorporated science, faith and culture in PNG. The content of the paper is more towards the latter component of the title. Is it possible to change the title so it reflects the content of the paper?

8. Inform Multi-site Study
The study tested the research processes to inform a multi-site study of the acceptability of male circumcision for HIV prevention in PNG. There is no guideline or recommendation(s) based on the pilot project to inform a multi site study.

9. Content of the Paper
The link between the research question and the content of paper is not clear. Use of appropriate vocabulary is critical to describe the research process (see point 6 above).

Minor Essential Revisions
1. Self–administered questionnaire
Under Abstract and under the Methods section clearly state who were expected to complete the questionnaire. Did male and female participants complete the same questionnaire? The first sentence under methods is not very clear.

2. Profile of the participants
Provide the total number of participants by gender and the regional Representation

3. Introduction of the content of the paper
Insert a statement to provide the outline of the paper before the discussion on the background.

4. Reference
Confirm with Review for Health Research Policy and System the correct way of
carried out the directives of ‘research leaders’. This research process deliberately sought student leaders as research partners and incorporated input from these student leaders throughout the research process. This process, and the justification for ‘partnering’ with student leaders is justified in the section ‘research partnerships that incorporate science, culture and religion’ in the background and also discussed in the discussion section.

We believe that the current title summarises the content of the manuscript well – it does discuss how the research incorporates science, culture and religion, but this is in the context of investigating the role of male circumcision for HIV prevention in Papua New Guinea. We therefore recommend the current title remain.

Discussion substantially edited to include lessons learned from this pilot study that can inform a multi-site study.

Edited manuscript now clearly articulates that the purpose of the paper is to describe the culturally informed research process and lessons learned from the research process. Use of vocabulary is deliberate and addressed in response to point 6 above).

Method section clearly states that there is separate male and female questionnaires.

First paragraph of the results section provides number of male and female participants and participation in focus group discussion by marital status.

We are unsure what this comment means – so unable to directly address it.

Confirmed
5. The Section on HIV in PNG
The first two sentences should be supported with reference or source of information.
In the first sentence the word potential is used. Avoid using the word. The sentence should read: Investigating new ways of preventing......
The fourth sentence in the same paragraph the phrase ‘low circumcision rates’ has not been confirmed as one of the factors in PNG because little is known about circumcision and HIV in PNG and more studies are need to support that argument.

The sixth sentence should begin with, The health delivery system is poorly managed .... The system is not weak but has been managed poorly.

6. Section on Partnering in Research
Under paragraph 3 and elsewhere in the paper do not use initials of the researchers. It is not a standard of writing research papers.

7. Section on Method
On line 3 delete the word successful.
Under paragraph 3, the first sentence delete ‘to the team’ after interest and before included.
Under paragraph 4 delete TM. In second sentence delete the word intentionally after were & before involved.

Reference inserted
Deleted word ‘potential’
Sentenced edited to provide further detail – it now reads “In 2006, it was estimated from health system data that less than 20% of men in PNG were circumcised [32, 33]. However, this may not have accounted for the numerous forms of foreskin cutting happening outside the formal health system in villages and towns across the country [3, 34].”

With due respect – the PNG health delivery system is commonly described as ‘weak’ because of its inability to provide basic health services to the country’s population. This is consistently reported by the National AIDS Council as a key constraint to HIV prevention, treatment and care in PNG. Poor management is one aspect of the ‘weak’ system, however there are many other aspects (such as the small number of health professionals per 1000 people, lack of facilities in rural areas and disparity between services for the rich and poor people) that justify the descriptor of ‘weak’. There are 6 references to this sentence – all of which justify the use of the term ‘weak’.

Authors have used initials of authors in manuscripts previously published in HARPS. Authors are happy to comply with current editorial policies of HARPS, should the use of authors’ initials no longer be appropriate we are happy to edit accordingly – otherwise we would prefer not to change this aspect of the manuscript.

Word ‘successful’ deleted
Words ‘to the team’ deleted
The authors have intentionally retained the word ‘intentionally’ because this is a key concept that is highlighted throughout the paper and we wish to highlight its importance in the manuscript.
| The third sentence, delete all after were & before led | Word ‘all’ deleted
| Working with student leaders | The authors have retained the phrase’ made up of collections of provinces’. This may be self evident for people from Papua New Guinea, however this is essential information for people with little knowledge about Papua New Guinea. Addressed above – see response to section 6
| First sentence, delete the phrase made up of collections of neighbouring provinces. | Second paragraph – partner is the incorrect word to describe the involvement of student leaders in the study. A technical term is research assistants.
| Second paragraph – partner is the incorrect word to describe the involvement of student leaders in the study. A technical term is research assistants. | A full paragraph is dedicated to the detail of the voluntary optional clinical examination in the revised manuscript. Purposive sampling technique is a standard qualitative non-probability sampling technique used in the social sciences. It is assumed that readers will have an understanding of this standard technique – so no further explanation has been provided.
| First sentence, provide details on the voluntary optional clinic examination | Detail inserted as follows ‘study participants with knowledge/experience of male circumcision and foreskin cutting were invited….’
| Sixth sentence, what is purposive sampling technique? | Data from table 1 now incorporated as text directly in results section
| 10. Section on Results | The revised manuscript highlights the ‘alternative ways’ as being the culturally informed research process that enables investigation of contentious sexual health research at a faith-based university by linking with student leaders as ‘partners’ and not just ‘research assistants’.
| What was the criteria used for selecting participants for semi structured interviews and focus group discussions? | Yes – most definitely! The first two paragraphs of the discussion section of the revised manuscript is dedicated to this very issue.
| Last paragraph and the last sentence – Table 1 should be replaced with appendix 1. It’s a Table when in the main body of the paper. | Discretionary Revision
| Last paragraph, second sentence what are the alternative ways that were discovered? | ‘ PAU researchers of the pilot study were influential, well respected senior lecturers…..at the university’. Don’t you think the influence of the researchers determined the outcome?
| 11. Capacity Building for research | 1. It's a Table when in the main body of the paper.