Reviewer's report

Title: Translating research into maternal health care policy: a qualitative case study of the use of evidence in policies for the treatment of eclampsia and pre-eclampsia in South Africa

Version: 1 Date: 30 September 2008

Reviewer number: 2

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Major Compulsory Revisions:

1. Although the authors state that they sought out respondents with differing views and explored “negative cases”, all the views and quotations presented in the manuscript are very much in agreement. One gets the impression that only those supporting the use of research evidence in health policy were interviewed. Were there no participants who emphasized the importance of other factors (clinical experience, feasibility, cost, etc.) in health policy formation?

2. It should be made clear that eclampsia treatment policies were selected for this study as one specific example of maternal health care policy development. However, one also wonders about the generalizability of this example. Magnesium sulphate for pre-eclampsia/eclampsia is perhaps one of the evidence-based obstetric practices that is most simple, least controversial, and easiest to change. It would be useful to compare this with policy development for more complex evidence-based practices, such as the provision of emotional support during labor, active management of the third stage of labor, or abandonment of routine episiotomy. Perhaps this is being done in the context of the larger study? Regardless, the characteristics of this particular evidence-based practices should be brought into the discussion.

3. In the Data Collection section, data sources need to be spelled out more clearly. “the development of a timeline” is not a data source, but rather a method/task. “Relevant bibliographical and conference databases and websites of organizations” mentioned later in this section are data sources.

4. Better description of the interview methods is needed. When you refer to a “standardised interview schedule”, it is unclear if the interviews were qualitative open-ended interviews or structured questionnaires. Also, you have not specified who conducted the interviews. Perhaps there was a bias if the interviewer is known as an advocate of evidence-based medicine? How were the interview guides developed and what were the major topics covered in the interviews?

5. In terms of the timeline, it seems difficult to tease out the effects of the changing political situation and the release of the compelling research evidence, since both happened around the same time (1994-1995). Perhaps the research results were so compelling that they would have been introduced into policy,
even without the political changes? The argument that all these factors were necessary to bring about the policy change needs strengthening.

6. Given the specific South African context, the authors need to make an explicit attempt in the discussion and conclusions to draw out any lessons for other countries. It seems like a relatively rare situation of complete political change, in which there was a complete changing of the guard of health policymakers to those who were committed to evidence-based medicine. Will other countries be able to achieve this radical change?

Minor Essential Revisions

7. Results and conclusions of the abstract do not say anything about what the authors found regarding specific policies for use of magnesium sulphate for treatment of pre-eclampsia/eclampsia.

8. In the introduction, explain the link between hypertension and pre-eclampsia for a non-clinician audience.

9. Renumber boxes according to their order of appearance in the manuscript.

10. Many of the quotations presented seem long and rambling, repeating similar points. They could be shortened and still give the same messages.

11. Box 3 is very difficult to follow as currently presented. It would be more useful if bullets could be used for the separate points and the points could be organized in such a way to make it easy to identify the similarities and differences among the three reviews. Perhaps the factors identified could be classified into groups presented in different panels of a table (landscape orientation).

Discretionary Revisions

12. The policy document review shows a strengthening of the use of research evidence in policy over time. This could be stated.

13. If possible, it would be helpful to have some information about actual implementation of the pre-eclampsia / eclampsia policies in South Africa in the Discussion section. Perhaps this will be included in a separate article?

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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