Reviewer’s report

Title: The safe motherhood referral system to reduce cesarean sections and perinatal mortality - a cross-sectional study [1999-2006]

Version: 1 Date: 8 September 2011

Reviewer: Jose G Cecatti

Reviewer’s report:

Major Compulsory Revisions:

- please use "antenatal/intrapartum care" instead of "antenatal/intrapartum assistance" consistently along side all the text
- please use "Cesarean section rate" instead of "Cesarean section percentage" in the whole text
- when describing rates, like perinatal mortality rate or maternal mortality ratio, please refer that they are per live births (LB)

Minor Essential Revisions:

- In the Introduction, second paragraph, it should be maternal mortality ratio instead of rate. Please check in all the text; there are others like this.
- Introduction, third paragraph, last line: please ad "...with a history of very high hospital..." (I suggest to insert "a history")
- Introduction, fourth paragraph, second line: please add "operational study" and delete "maternal" from "maternal health program"
- Introduction, fourth paragraph, fourth line: delete "of maternal and neonatal care" (it is repeated)
- Introduction, fourth paragraph, seventh line: add "management" between "diagnoses" and "and clinical programs"
- Methods session: "procedure" is a not appropriate word. What about "operational research"?
- Methods session, item " Safe motherhood referral system", second paragraph: The last phrase of this paragraph would be better in this way: " As a result, all high risk pregnant women were planned to deliver at the Level III hospital, and all low-risk pregnant women were planned to deliver at the Level II hospitals".
- Results session, first paragraph: these figures of deliveries are for both hospitals? If yes, please state so. The last phrase " Of these deliveries..." would be better as "Among these deliveries..."
- Results session: it would be interesting if the data in table 1 could be stratified according to each year of the whole period, or even in two periods, in order to see if there was a historical trend.
- Results, third paragraph referring to Figure 1: it should contain the information
regarding the effect of time

-Results, fourth paragraph, third line: I think it should be "during" instead of "between"

-Results, eighth paragraph: it is not clear for a common reader. Its content should be better explained

-Discussion session, first paragraph: this is a cross sectional study only describing the results of an operational study which introduced a referral system for safer motherhood. There is no group of comparison, nor a systematic comparison before and after the introduction of the system. Therefore caution should be taken into account for conclusions and recommendations. It is not correct to say that "the referral system was shown to be an effective strategy for decreasing a C-section rate" for instance. It could preferably be "to be associated with a decrease in the C-section rate". The same kind of affirmation is repeated some times during the discussion and conclusions. Please rewrite these passages.

- In addition, I think the manuscript lacks here a comment on the possible cohort effect. It means, it lasts around 12 years and it would be expected that some trends were changing during this period, only because there were improvements in the way the care were provided for women, independently of the referral system itself. This should be taken into account and commented in the discussion session. There is no way to eliminate this possibility, considering there was no comparison group.

- The discussion should also contain more details on possible limitations of this type of study and the problems possible to find when adapting this experience to other realities

- Figures: they are too "heavy". Please try to improve their quality

- Figure 2: it is not necessary to keep in the figure both vaginal births and C-sections. Considering they are complementary, please show only C-section rates. This is more than enough and also make it easier to see and understand.

Discretionary Revisions

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.