Reviewer's report

Title: Evaluating health worker performance in Benin using the simulated client method with real children

Version: 2 Date: 19 April 2012

Reviewer: Margaret Camilla Watson

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Major Compulsory Revisions

This study compared data collection by simulated clients versus overt observation. The current manuscript is very long. It would benefit from restructuring and being written in a much more concise manner.

The authors do not mention in the main manuscript that the scenario that was tested was for the management of fever – this should be added. The age range of children used in this study ranged from 6 to 59 months. To what extent does the “gold standard” treatment of fever in children aged 6 months differ from its management in older children e.g. 59 months? If there is no difference then this should be stated. If there is a difference then are these results valid? Currently, the results have not been adjusted to reflect the different ages of children used in these visits. No information is presented regarding the development of the scenarios or who delivered the simulated client training; this information should be added.

Information needs to be provided regarding how the training status of health workers was confirmed. This is a fundamental aspect of this study and as such reassurance is needed regarding the rigour with which this characteristic was designated.

It is of major concern that a large number of health workers (n=31) who received a simulated client visit had not consented to participate in this study. This raises concerns regarding the overall conduct of this study.

A reference should be added for the Taylor expansion method (page 10).

In terms of the presentation of the results on page 13, the current presentation is unhelpful and repetitious of the data presented in Table 1. Table 1 in itself is too long and needs to be restructured into additional tables. Confidence intervals should be presented where possible. Alternative methods of presenting the results should be discussed with a statistician.

The overt observation was conducted by teams of individuals, some of whom were IMCI trainers. Surely this fact would introduce substantial bias into the results because of the likely effect it would have on the health workers who were being observed? This fact alone raises serious concerns regarding the validity of the results.

The discussion needs to be more focussed and to relate to the wider literature.
i.e. beyond that of the lead author’s bibliography!

The presentation of the results in Table 1 needs substantial revision and simplification. Where a common stem to a question or statement is used e.g. “HW determined if ...” then this should be included once and then the different options listed below. The % signs should be removed from individual cells and included in the “indicator” cell. Remove “points” from the individual cells to make the table more legible. Correct the alignment of the final two rows of the table so that all the text is visible.

I believe that the comparison that was undertaken in this study, namely covert versus overt observation, is important and the results (if derived rigorously) will be of interest and relevance beyond the research community.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests'.