Reviewer's report

Title: Barriers and Facilitators to Patient Retention in HIV Care

Version: 4 Date: 30 January 2015

Reviewer: Peter Rebeiro

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. This is very important work in the field of HIV Care Continuum research. I wondered if the authors could expound on the differences between the “Retained” and “Not Retained” groups a bit more clearly through the data they painstakingly collected. In particular, even though this is qualitative work, it would be nice to see the raw numbers of respondents falling into the thematic categories of barriers/facilitators (beyond their division into tertiles, which does aid in broader characterization/comparison) and to speak more clearly about any differences between groups by their response patterns/characteristics as either quantitative or qualitative differences. For example, if the authors wish to convey statistical differences in number of respondents within thematic categories, that would be fine. If not, even a mention of “Low” vs. “High” differences in tertiles (and so on) would be helpful in the Results section. Since the novelty of this work is largely due to the exploration of barriers/facilitators in these two groups, it would be helpful to have these comparisons spelled out clearly in the text, not just Tables 2 and 3. It would also be important to note this clearly (qualitative comparison of tertiles) under the Methods section in Data Analysis (Page 6, Lines 14-15), where you note that “Identified barriers and facilitators were compared between the two groups of interest…”.

2. In the Methods section, under Data Collection (Page 5, Lines 8-11), the authors note that viral suppression was categorized with a 400 copies/mL cut-off. It would be good to note why this was the case (LLQ for most-commonly used assay in this population? Commonly used suppression threshold? Facilitate comparison with other populations/research in which this was a suppression threshold? etc.).

3. In the Methods section, under Data Collection (Page 5, Lines 13-15), you mention a literature review but don’t cite it- if this has been published, please cite; if not, please mention the number of articles and their timeliness (e.g. “…based on a literature review of barriers and facilitators to HIV care and treatment encompassing 35 articles published over the past 10 years…”). This helps convey the thoroughness/relevance of your review.

4. In the Methods section, under Data Analysis (Page 6, Lines 10-11), you mention assessing inter-rater reliability as “strong”. Please provide the statistical test used to assess this, its point estimate, and either a confidence interval or
p-value.

5. In the Results section, you sometimes use quantitative language when I am unsure if you mean this as a quantitative comparison or not. For example, Page 7, Line 23 you state “Participants in the two patient groups equally reported feeling sick...”; does this mean that the numbers reporting feeling sick are not statistically significantly different, or that their numbers fall in the same tertiles (as seen in Table 2)? If it is the latter, perhaps describing these groups’ responses as falling in the same tertile would be more appropriate than stating that they are equivalent/equal (which has a more mathematically precise connotation). Again, on Page 9, Line 17, you note that “Non-retained patients were more likely to discuss difficulties with scheduling appointments than retained participants.” Using language such as “more often” or “more commonly” as descriptions of similarities/differences in the tertiles for responses across groups seems more appropriate to your purposes than more quantitative language involving equivalences, likelihoods, frequencies, probabilities, etc. Please keep the language as consistent as possible (even if you feel you are being repetitive). This is related to the concern in item 1 (above).

6. In the Results section, under Facilitators of Retention in Care (Page 10, Lines 11-12), you mention that “Retained participants more commonly discussed the importance of a positive relationship with their HIV provider...than non-retained individuals.” Are you describing differences in the raw numbers of participant responses between groups? According to Table 3, both groups fall into the “High” tertile. Perhaps presenting the raw numbers of responses in each group in Table 3 would help. If not, making the numbers/tertiles you are referencing in this passage would help avoid confusion. If you are indeed talking about the tertiles of responses, then please rephrase to note that retained patients discussed this factor as often as non-retained patients did.

7. In the Discussion section, when discussing the possible limitations of your study, you fail to mention that your clinical population may not reflect other populations (issues of generalizability/representativeness), particularly in their experience of certain barriers (e.g., stigma may be different in different locations due to cultural differences, insurance barriers may be different in different states due to Medicaid/ADAP threshold eligibility differences, etc.). This study is still extremely helpful, but it should fairly mention that not all barriers/facilitators may apply to the same degree in other clinical populations (and that some of this variation will be individual, some will be dependent on clinical practice differences, and some will be dependent on location/cultural/environmental differences, etc.). At least brief mention of these issues should be made.

8. In Table 1, it is possible to make statistical comparisons between these groups by the characteristics in the table (using non-parametric tests for differences in proportions). This may be a useful step in describing the population in your study, and differences by group (this would help address how representative your study might be of the demographic/clinical differences in Retained vs. Non-retained populations you reference in the Background).
• Minor Essential Revisions

1. Results (Page 6, Line 22), the % of patients on ART should be 96%, not 98%

2. Results (Page 7, Lines 10), the “that” after “…relative frequency (high, medium, low)…” should be a “with which”.

3. Results (Page 10, Line 5), “bath” should be “bathe”

4. Results (Page 11, Lines 14-15), “on-retained” should be “non-retained”

5. Results (Page 12, Line 19), do you mean “valuation” instead of “value”?

6. Table 1 (Page 19), missing open parenthesis for “(84%)” in the “Black” Race/Ethnicity row and the “Retained in Care” column.

7. Table 1 (Page 19), in the Abbreviations in the footnote, correct “NNRTI” to include the “I” for inhibitor.

• Discretionary Revisions

None.

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests