Reviewer's report

Title: Why gone too soon? Examining social determinants of neonatal deaths in northwest Ethiopia using the three delay model approach

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Reviewer: Cheryl A. Moyer

Reviewer's report:

The authors have presented a comprehensive examination of the use of Social Autopsy with 39 neonatal deaths in northwest Ethiopia. The topic is very important, the methods are well described, and overall I believe this could be a strong contribution to the literature. My suggestions for improvement are as follows:

1) I suggest the authors be exceedingly careful with the wording around delays, deaths, and "accounting for" versus "associated with" - several instances use a phrase such as "Delay 1 was the major type of delay accounting for 81% of the deaths." It is not possible from this study to determine whether a delay in fact caused a death, or whether the individual might have died regardless of whether that delay had not occurred. Thus I strongly avoiding causative language, and instead talk about how delays were 'associated with' 81% of the deaths.

2) As written, this manuscript seems to assume that all cases had some sort of delay. (Figure 2 suggests that they did as well.) Did any cases NOT have a delay? (This is one of my criticisms of the Three Delays Model as it is typically operationalized - researchers tend to assume either a) all bad outcomes must be attributable to one type of delay or another; or b) delays are the only reason babies die. While I think most researchers KNOW that neither of those is the case, it tends to get lost when the focus of the analysis is solely on delays. Perhaps this is worth expanding upon in the discussion?)

3) Background, page 4, third paragraph: Death of newborns is often preventable... (not always preventable)

4) The methods say that deaths that occurred within the past 28 months were included... but in the limitations it says a recall period as long as 18 months. Which is correct?

5) Page 7 - the description of the VA coding is not exactly clear. It sounds like the authors had a panel of physician coders who independently assessed the VA data to arrive at cause of death.... but that is not stated.
Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
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I am able to assess the statistics

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