Reviewer’s report

Title: Determinants of healthcare seeking for childhood illnesses among caregivers of under-five children in urban slums in Malawi: a population-based cross-sectional study

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Reviewer: Kimberly Arcoleo

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript. This paper examined factors affecting healthcare seeking behaviors among a sample of caregivers with children under 5 years of age living in urban slum neighborhoods of Malawi. The Integrated Management of Childhood Illnesses (IMCI) is the primary approach to promoting access to healthcare across a continuum of care that is being used to increase access to essential child health services in support of the Sustainable Development Goals. To date, this has been implemented primarily in rural areas with the assumption that urban areas had better facilities and programs. The premise is that in developing countries urban environments have typically been examined as homogenous entities but this ignores the fact that there are urban slums within these neighborhoods which have higher rates of health disparities and poor health outcomes. Thus, these investigators sought to identify factors influencing caregivers' decisions about when to seek healthcare, the timing of the healthcare visits, and under what circumstances they sought care. These analyses used data collected as part of a larger population-based study.

The study design was rigorous and included three urban slum neighborhoods in Lilongwe, Malawi, none of which included a public health facility. An appropriate sample size calculation was done using an acceptable attrition rate. Probability Proportionate to Size sampling was used which is acceptable. A pretest of the questionnaire was conducted prior to the main study. An important independent variable, caregiver autonomy, was measured because in many cultures, health care seeking and treatment may not be independent decisions.

The results of this study highlighted some critical areas that could be become targets for intervention and also demonstrated that the IMCI model should be considered for urban slum areas as a mechanism for improving early detection and treatment of disease in infants and young children. The results of this study also point to the need to disaggregate data into smaller geographical units because one cannot assume that an urban or rural area is homogeneous within the boundary that is defined.

This study was well-done and the manuscript well-written. It provides valuable information to inform health education strategies for caregivers and families and identifies potential areas for programmatic and policy change.
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?
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Yes

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I am able to assess the statistics

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