Author's response to reviews

Title: Sexual Behavior and Vulnerability to HIV Infection among Seasonal Migrant Laborers in Metema District, Northwest Ethiopia: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Author's response to reviews: see over
To: BMC Public Health

Subject: Submission of point by point response to reviewers’ comment on our manuscript

Dear editor,

We are very grateful to the thoughtful comments of the reviewers that significantly improved our manuscript. As per the comments given by the reviewers, we here by submit point by point response and revisions on the manuscript entitled “Sexual Behavior and Vulnerability to HIV Infection among Seasonal Migrant Laborers in Metema District, Northwest Ethiopia: A Cross-Sectional Study”.

Therefore, this is to request you for considering our manuscript in your journal.

The authors
Point by point response to Reviewer 1

Title: Sexual Behavior and Vulnerability to HIV Infection among Seasonal Migrant Laborers in Metema District, Northwest Ethiopia: A Cross-Sectional Study.

Reviewer: Loraine Townsend

Dear Reviewer,

We are very grateful to your thoughtful comments that significantly improved our manuscript. Below is the point by point response and revisions as per your comment.

Comment:
BACKGROUND
This section is not well developed. While the authors do touch on the broader implications of migrant populations for the spread of HIV and the possible reasons why this might occur, there is little about what other studies have found in relation to high risk sexual behavior among migrant laborers.

Comment well-taken, and background improved. Related literatures are included in the background. But, as the background in this manuscript is very short, the authors can’t include all what is in the main document.
Major revisions:
1. I would suggest that the authors introduce the studies in India, U.S., Kenya, South Africa and their findings with respect to risky sexual behavior/s in this section. They are currently cited in the Discussion.
Comment is well-taken: document improved
2. The authors need to explain what they mean when they state: “Fernandez [6] suggests that isolation leads to increased sexual needs due to differing behaviors while away.” I cannot follow this argument. Perhaps the sentence should read: …isolation leads to increased sexual needs and differing behaviors while away? Also reference [6] should be placed at the end of the sentence (minor essential revision).
Corrected as: Isolation leads to increased sexual needs and differing behaviors while away [6].
3. Please expand a little on the statement “Social control in migrant communities is often limited, and sexual relationships that are prohibited at home are often possible abroad [4].”
Comment well-taken, and corrected as: when seasonal migrant workers leave their familiar environment with traditional norms and values, and the anonymity of being a foreigner might increase risky sexual activities.
4. STI should be spelled out the first time it is used (3rd para in introduction) (minor essential revision).
Well taken; STI spelled out as “Sexually Transmitted Infections”.
5. There is something wrong with this sentence: “With the number of migrants who are at risk of HIV infection continuing to rise, and with the epidemic spreading to rural areas throughout their origin, these issues are all the more timely and important.” Should it possibly read “…throughout their places of origin…”?
Comment well-taken, and corrected as: “With the number of migrants who are at risk of HIV infection continuing to rise, and with the epidemic spreading to rural areas throughout their places of origin, these issues are all the more timely and important.”
6. The following sentence is particularly long and confusing, and the authors are encouraged to revise it.
Comment well taken, and corrected as: “However, no studies have investigated the mobility patterns of male seasonal migrant laborers, the changes in sexual behaviors accompanying migration, and the implications of seasonal migration for the spread of HIV infection. Moreover, HIV risk among migrant workers has not been studied despite the potential for migrant workers to rapidly transmit HIV to other populations.”

7. The authors refer to “spouses” in the 3rd and 4th paragraphs of the background. I think a more accurate description would be “spouses and regular sexual partners”.

Corrected as: spouses and regular sexual partners.

METHOD

On the whole this section is well written and clear. I would suggest some clarity and additional information as follows:

**Study setting**

**Major revision:** Please indicate in what way HIV prevalence in Metema is elevated compared to where/what other prevalence data referred to in this sentence “Ethiopian Ministry of Health [17] found an elevated prevalence of HIV infection in Metema hospital (7.5%).”

**Corrected as:** The 2009 Ethiopian Ministry of Health sentinel surveillance survey found an elevated prevalence of HIV infection in Metema hospital (7.5%), while the National and Regional HIV prevalence is 1.5% and 1.6% respectively [17].

**Minor essential revision:** Also, place reference [17] at end of the sentence. (See correction above)

**Questionnaires:** (Corrected)

**Major revisions:** A little more detail is required. For example, give an example of what is meant by “it was modified for the local context”. How many questions comprised the questionnaire?

**Response:** Clarifications incorporated in the manuscript.

**Major revision:**

I suggest the authors include a sub-heading: “Procedures”. This section would use pieces currently in “Data Quality Control” and “Ethical Considerations”, and should include how people were approached, what they were told and by whom about the study, how verbal informed consent was obtained, how many people refused to participate, how the questionnaires were administered and by whom, how long did questionnaire administration take, what level of training was provided to administrators, the venues where questionnaires were administered (issues such as privacy etc.), what measures were employed to try to ensure honest reporting (given the sensitivity of the questions)?

**Response:** the below detailed explanation included in each sub-heading: data collection procedures, ethics, data quality control and results sections.

Twelve Nurses and Health Officers were recruited for data collection. One day training has been given for data collectors. The training focused on understanding on the meaning of each question, the need to obtain an informed consent, keeping confidentiality of the information they gathered, quality of data as well as the techniques of presenting the questions for participants in an understandable manner.

Participants of the study were introduced about the purpose of the study and the importance of their participation in the study. They were informed that participation is completely voluntary and what they will be telling us is completely confidential. After verbal informed consent has been obtained from participants, individual face to face interview has been conducted at farm places under a tree. The interview has been conducted for an hour. The response rate of participants was 100%.
Study variables
Discretionary revision: The authors state that “Dependent variables were risky sexual behaviors [multiple sexual partners in 6 months, unprotected sexual intercourse in most recent non-marital sex] and vulnerability to HIV infection.” Rather state the dependent variables as 1) condom use at last sex, and 2) multiple partners (>2) in past 6 months, which is in line with Tables 3 and 4.
Corrected as: Dependent variables 1) condom use at last sex, and 2) multiple partners (>2) in past 6 months,

Operation Definitions
Discretionary revision: I don’t believe this heading adds anything to one’s understanding of the variables/data. I would delete this paragraph.
Response: Because, there are different contextual definitions for risky sexual behaviors some readers might be confused with other operational definitions. Therefore, these definitions are important.

Data analysis
Major revisions:
1. What confounders were controlled for and what was the rationale for including the confounders in the multiple logistic regression models?
Response: These are independent variables presented in the bivariate analysis and show some association with the outcome variables. The purpose of including these variables in the multiple logistic regression analysis was to control their confounding effect. Then the independent association to the outcome variable was presented as AOR.
2. The Tables (3 and 4) should have foot notes to explain what the AOR were adjusted for.
Response: Foot note included

RESULTS
Major revision: The authors state under the “Strengths” sub-heading that – “some respondents did not provide actual information about their sexual behavior and practice, a hidden discourse.” How many did not supply information about which sexual behaviors and practice/s? Was any sub-analysis done to see whether those who did not supply this information were perhaps systematically different from those who did? For example, were they consistently older men, men who were married etc. I would suggest that such an analysis is done and reported briefly.
Corrected

Table 2:
Discretionary revision: Am I reading the information in this Table correctly?: 582 had non-marital sexual partners in past 6 months. Of those only 397 provided responses to using alcohol during sex
The above statement should state as: 582 participants had ever sex in their life time. Of those only 397 had non-marital sexual partners in past 6 months, and 296/397 provided responses to using alcohol during sex, number of partners, type of partner, condom use. In other words 32% refused to / did not provide further information. If I am correct, then I suggest it would be a good idea to include this number in the reporting in the Table 1 (where relevant). For example: Type of non-marital sex partner (n=397; 185 (32%) did not answer), Commercial sex workers 293, Girlfriend/casual partner 104
Response: The result in table 2 shows:
- 582 of the total 756 participants had ever sex in their life time (can be marital or non-marital sexual intercourse), of these, 397 had non-marital sex in the preceding 6 months and the remaining 185(32%) provide information that they do not have non-marital sexual intercourse
- 296/397 used alcohol during the last non-marital sexual intercourse.
- number of partners, type of partner, condom use: means, of the 397 respondents having non-marital sex in the preceding 6 months, how many of them have 1, 2, or 3+ sex partners, how many of them use condom at their most recent non-marital sex, and with what type of sex partners they do sexual intercourse in their most recent non-marital sexual intercourse (CSWs, girlfriends, etc).

**Migration-related characteristics**
Minor essential revision: Two-thirds (499(66%)) should read: Two-thirds, 499 (66%)
Corrected as per the comment

**Risky sexual behaviors of seasonal migrant laborers**

**Major revisions:**
1. What is the difference between having sex with a CSW and having transactional sex? My understanding is that payment is exchanged in both relationships.
   **Response:** When having sex with CSWs, there is always payment of money for sex, and the CSWs take it as formal job. In transactional sex, payment is exchanged in the form of money, property, or when men do favor for women and receive sexual intercourse for the favor they do, eg. Men do some job for women and have sex with women. Women may not be CSWs.
2. Where the authors state: “Further, 296/397 (74.6%) respondents had consumed alcohol at their last sex with CSWs”, do they not mean that X% had consumed alcohol at their last sex with non-marital partners?
   **Response:** Some times, sex without paying can be possible with CSWs known before
3. These statements: “Further, 296/397 (74.6%) respondents had consumed alcohol at their last sex with CSWs. Moreover, 283/582 (48.6%) of the respondents had sex with a paid partner in the preceding 6 months (Table 2)” would be more clearly stated as “Further, 296/397 (74.6%) of respondents who had had non-marital sex in the previous 6 months had consumed alcohol at their last sex with ….. Moreover, 283/582 (48.6%) of the respondents who had ever had sex had sex with a paid partner in the preceding 6 months (Table 2).
   **Comment well-taken, the above correction included in the manuscript**

**Factors associated with condom use at last non-marital sexual intercourse**

**Major revisions:**
The reporting of findings about condom use is disjointed and confusing. Some issues needing clarity are:
1. Authors state: “Marginal significant variation in condom use was observed among seasonal workers who did not pay when having sexual intercourse with CSWs (AOR=1.48, 95% CI: 0.95, 2.31).” Please explain how it was possible that seasonal workers were able to have sex with CSW without paying.
   **Response:** Some times, sex without paying can be possible with CSWs known before
2. Authors state: “Respondents who paid more for sex were less likely to use condom at last non-marital sex (Table 3).” Please explain here (and perhaps elsewhere) what the difference is between having sex with CSW and paying for sex?
   **Response:** Paying for sex will include gift of any kind of material or money, whereas sex with CSWs is always based on payment of money.
3. It is less confusing if authors consistently frame their discussion in the same way that the results are reported. For example, here authors state: “Indeed, more than half of sexually active respondents reported they usually did not use a condom during any sex episodes.” However, when reporting this in the Results, authors states that “42.4% of the seasonal migrant laborers had ever used condoms during any sexual intercourse.”
   **Comment well-taken: and corrected as:**
In the Results: A large proportion (57.6%) of respondents reported they never use a condom during any sex episodes. Although 247/582 (42.4%) of the seasonal migrant laborers had ever used condoms during any sexual intercourse, only 132 (53.4%) of them used condoms consistently.

In the discussion: More than half (57.6%) of respondents reported they usually did not use a condom during any sex episodes. In addition, 49% of the respondents do not use condom during their recent non-marital sexual intercourse.

DISCUSSION

Major revisions

1. Where comparisons to studies done in India, North Carolina and California are made, authors need to provide a rationale for choosing these studies for comparison. (If these studies are referred to in the Background, as suggested, it might become clearer). Where/are there no studies from sub-Saharan Africa that might be equally or more relevant for comparative purposes? I also question use of findings from a study among high school youth and a study among in- and out of school youth in Ethiopia as comparisons. These youth are not equivalent to the current study’s population. There is some confusion when authors speak about sex with CSW (in India), and also state “Hence, seasonal migrant farm workers engage in high-risk behavior with CSWs.” I am not sure whether the authors are referring to sex with CSW or sex with non-marital sex partner in their own study.

Response: We have included all the available studies that are relevant and comparable to our study, including studies from other settings.

2. Please explain / expand this statement: “In addition to this, the seasonal migrant workers’ personal characteristics or social environment itself may lead to risky sexual activity and initiation of multiple sexual partners [24,32,34].”

Comment included in the manuscript: 1. when we say “the seasonal migrant workers’ personal characteristics”, (62%) of the respondents are age 20- 29, 66% are not married, and 36% are illiterate, 64% drink Alcohol….,

2. When we say Social environment: peer influence, lack of social support while away from family, not receiving recent information on HIV/AIDS (96%), receiving better income (43%) …., which can lead to risky sexual activity and initiation of multiple sexual partners.

3. When discussing condom use, authors state as a possible explanation – “It may be that newer arrivals lack social support or are affected by the new social environment.” This statement needs further explanation. In what way could social support and/or the social environment impact on condom use?

Response: Because, new arrivals do not know the source and availability of condoms.

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
Point by point response to Reviewer 2

Title: Sexual Behavior and Vulnerability to HIV Infection among Seasonal Migrant Laborers in Metema District, Northwest Ethiopia: A Cross-Sectional Study.

Reviewer: Jennifer Hirsch

Dear Reviewer,

We are very grateful to your thoughtful comments that significantly improved our manuscript. Below is the point by point response and revisions as per your comment.

Comment:
The authors of this manuscript conducted a survey to assess vulnerability to HIV among migrant agricultural workers in Ethiopia. As they note, there is a well-documented association between labor migration and vulnerability to HIV. The methods are appropriate inasmuch as the stated goal is to assess individual-level risk practices.

Major compulsory revisions: The article would be greatly strengthened if the authors considered how the survey findings are relevant conceptually in relation to the broader literature on HIV and migration. In other words, if all that they do here is document behavioral vulnerability to HIV for migrants in Ethiopia, then it is not entirely clear why this would be of interest to the broader public health research community, though clearly this is a finding that is important from a policy and practice point of view.

Response: Thank you for your very valuable comment, and indicating some important articles. We have tried to include literatures that are available and improved the background of this manuscript. We also have included the conceptual framework based on our review.

A good start might be ground the paper more thoroughly in the substantial literature on HIV and migration. One important reference is Weine and Kashuba’s (Weine & Kashuba, 2012). Other authors whose work has been important in the Sub-Saharan African context include Campbell (Campbell, 1997) and Lurie (M. N. Lurie, 2006; M. Lurie et al., 2003). Another one I particularly like because of how it lays out the conceptual pieces is Albarran and Nyamathi (Albarran & Nyamathi, 2011). In all of this, what the authors should consider is how their work in Ethiopia contributes to/challenges/differs from what has been found elsewhere. It’s not so useful to compare just the prevalence of various practices in different contexts, particularly contexts as diverse as India, North Carolina, California, or Croatia, as the authors do; what would be more useful would be to discuss how the determinants of vulnerability might differ in the Ethiopian context from those discussed elsewhere (that is, to look at this problem a bit more abstractly and less conceptually). The fact that HIV and migration has not previously been studied in Ethiopia is not, by itself, significant enough to raise this work to the level of being of general interest.
A key conceptual area in which the paper could be stronger is that it focuses heavily on individual behavior, and recommends prevention approaches which have not generally been effective at bending the curve of the epidemic.

Comment well-taken: comment included in the recommendation section.

• For example, they define vulnerability in relation to workers and communities, but then provide little information about the communities – nothing about the organization of sex work, availability of condoms, the conditions of housing, access to forms of entertainment other than purchased sex, or the working conditions, all of which would be relevant to understanding community capacity to respond to these findings as well as the social determinants of vulnerability.

Response: The study objective didn’t allow us to explore all the determinants of vulnerability. We have recommended this for further research.

• The findings that men who have received HIV education are more likely to report using condoms may just mean that they are more likely to know that the person administering the survey wants them to have used condoms.

Response: Although social desirability bias might be possible, we have recruited data collectors that the respondents do not know them before.

• IEC to effect behavioral change has not generally by itself had a substantial or enduring impact on behavior.

Response: Yes, but IEC is the necessary initial step towards behavior change in Ethiopia.

• The recommendation for targeted prevention and interventions at migrant workers’ destinations and farm sites needs to take into account key stakeholders – who are the owners of these farms?

Comment well-taken: Yes, stakeholders like the Bureau of Health, Bureau of Social and labour affairs, Farm owners need to be involved in the intervention.

• The recommendation for promotion of testing at departure and return could lead to some fairly draconian ways of treating labor migrants, who are already quite vulnerable, and the notion of promoting condom use with main partners fails to take into account the fact that almost everywhere people are quite reluctant to use condoms with main partners because it is tantamount to confessing having had other partners.

Response: As per the Ethiopian national HIV prevention and control guideline, voluntary counseling and testing is believed to promote safer sexual behavior of individuals.

Overall, authors might consider focusing more on the context of migration – perhaps not in this work, but as they develop this line of research. The association between labor migration and HIV reflects the underlying social vulnerability of migrant laborers, but that is not an inevitable characteristic of migration - it is produced by specific social and economic policies, and could potentially be modified.

Comment well taken and document improved:

One particularly interesting element of the findings was the relation between length of stay on the farm and condom use. There is work elsewhere about loneliness and vulnerability to HIV among labor migrants (Hirsch, Muñoz-Laboy, Nyhus, Yount, & Bauermeister, 2009; Parrado,
Flippen, & McQuiston, 2004) and so in a future version of the paper the authors may wish to particularly explore that finding, which clearly lends itself to community-level prevention approaches in terms of thinking about ways in which the context of migration could be transformed to provide more social support.

Comment well taken:

Here are the citations of the readings mentioned above


Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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.
Point by point by point response to Reviewer 3

**Title:** Sexual Behavior and Vulnerability to HIV Infection among Seasonal Migrant Laborers in Metema District, Northwest Ethiopia: A Cross-Sectional Study.

**Reviewer:** Weerasak Putthasri

Dear Reviewer,

We are very grateful to your thoughtful comments that significantly improved our manuscript. Below is the point by point response and revisions as per your comment.

**Comment:**

**Study setting** (page 4): please check number of male and female population again, it should be 119,054 in total Sampling (page 5): authors used lottery sampling to select 14 study sites, this means it is assumed that all site are homogenous? If yes, please specify

Comment well taken, corrected: 1. Total population of Metema is 119,050, (Males 63,433, Females 55,617).

2. We used lottery sampling to select 14 study sites, by assuming that all sites are homogenous; with similar geographic location, proximity, similar social environment, and similar characteristics of migrant workers.

**Data quality control** (page 6): authors already described method of data collection and quality control. However, since this sexual behavior data may be a sensitive-issue, could authors explain more who data collectors are? How many of them?, any language and cultural barrier?

Comment well taken, and included in the methods section.

Twelve Nurses and Health Officers, knowledgeable of the respondents’ language (Amharic) and culture were recruited for data collection. Appropriate training has been given.

**Table 1** (page 17): in religion category, please make sure total percentage should be 100%

Corrected:

**Table 2** (page 18): number and percentage in the table is quite confusing since 'n' in each category are not the same. I understand that it is because there is high missing in each category, correct?. I suggest to modify this table to more easy read.

Comment well-taken: 1. 'n' in each category are not the same, because some of the variables depend on responses from the preceding variable

**Table 3 and 4:** (OR calculation) authors should seriously consult a statistician to re-check OR formulation, this result will mis-leads of audiences' understanding.

For instance, in Table 4 'paid for sex' as exposure: in multi sex partners (case), ratio of paid to non-paid (exposure to non-exposure) is 65/208 while in no-multi sex partners (control) are 57/67.

Corrected in the revised regression analysis.
Again for odd ratio, authors sometimes use 'yes' as reference' and sometimes use 'no' as reference. It could lead audiences confused. Let the ratio or OR itself says. If OR>1, it's risk factor; if OR<1, it's preventive factor. Corrected in the revised regression analysis.

**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:** none
Point by point by point response to Reviewer 4

Title: Sexual Behavior and Vulnerability to HIV Infection among Seasonal Migrant Laborers in Metema District, Northwest Ethiopia: A Cross-Sectional Study.

Reviewer: Stevan M Weine

Dear Reviewer,

We are very grateful to your thoughtful comments that significantly improved our manuscript. Below is the point by point response and revisions as per your comment.

Comment:
This is an interesting article, well-written, addressing a significant public health problem, with strong methodology. It is weakened by the issues below, which are addressable.

Major compulsory revisions
1. The issue of marriage and spouses’ role could be important. Analysis should be conducted around whether marriage was a factor in HIV risk/protection. Also, did reg reviewers ask if husband spoke with spouses?
   Response: a). absolutely correct, marriage was considered in the regression analysis but removed from the final model due to lack of statistical significance.
b) The Question; if husband spoke with spouses is included in Table 2.
2. There is no discussion of religion and what role it could play.
   Response: There was no significant role in religion as all (97.4%) of the respondents were Orthodox, and only few (2.6%) were Muslims and protestant.
3. There is no mention of theory or a conceptual framework guiding this review.
The authors need to make this explicit and let it inform their analysis and discussion.
Comment well-taken; conceptual framework included in the document.

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
Dear Reviewer,

We are very grateful to your thoughtful comments that significantly improved our manuscript. Below is the point by point response and revisions as per your comment.

Comment:

**Major Compulsory Revisions**

1. Paragraph 3, page 3, the author interpreted “bridge populations” as the people who transfer HIV from high-risk population to low-risk populations. But in the paragraph 3, page 7, since only less than half of participants, 258 (34.1%) were married, how can this whole population (migrated labors) be a “bridge populations” (paragraph 2, page 11)? The author should provide more details on that.

   **Response:** This does not mean that married migrant workers will not be engaged in risky sexual behaviors. Migrant workers both married and unmarried may engage in unprotected sex with spouses and other sex partners at the place of origin. Thus, they may be a “bridge population”.

2. Of the total of 756 participants, how many of them brought their spouse with them? Were these people’s sexual behaviors different from those didn’t bring spouse? Theoretically, with spouse on work, they are more likely to reduce risky sexual behaviors and vulnerability to HIV infection.

   **Response:** None of them brought their spouse with them. When asked if they want their wife to be with them at the farm, 79.5% of respondents did not want their spouses to be with them. The reason, 94% of the respondents gave was, there is no appropriate living room for them to live with their spouses in the farm environment.

**Minor Essential Revisions**

1. Paragraph 2, page 8# the knowledge level of participants on HIV/AIDS could be coded as a variate, and included in the multivariate analysis.

   **Response:** Knowledge of participants on HIV/AIDS was coded and included in the bivariate and multivariate analysis; it was significantly associated with condom use.

2. Paragraph 4, page 5#Sampling#”…… of these, 14 farms/PSUs (two from Mertread, and twelve from Delelo), referred to as “study sites”, were selected by lottery.” Can you describe it in details, especially the reason for 14 farms/PSUs were chosen, other than 15 or 16?
Response: Due to resource limitation the authors decide to limit number of sampling units, then only 14 farms were randomly chosen (Two from Mertread, and twelve from Delelo were proportionally allocated).

3. Paragraph 4, page 7, “Two-thirds (499(66%) of seasonal workers had migrated to work at Metema farms for at least the second time.” The times of the participants came from hometown and worked on farm could be essential factors affecting their awareness of HIV prevention, because the HIV prevention information on their work site were different from their hometown. We recommend the author take this factor into account for the multivariate analysis.

Response: the times of the participants came from hometown and worked on farm was considered in the analysis, but was not significant and removed from the final model. But duration of stay in the farm was included in the analysis and has significant association with condom use.

4. Paragraph 3, Page 7, “Two hundred seventy-two (36.0%) respondents were unable to read and write”. How did they finish the questionnaire? Did their questionnaire were completed by data collectors with face-to-face interview? The authors need to explain that in details.

Response: Data was collected through face to face interview by trained data collectors.

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests: I declare that I have no competing interests.