Reviewer's report

Title: Awareness, attitudes and perceptions regarding HIV and PMTCT amongst pregnant women in Guinea-Bissau - a qualitative study

Version: 1 Date: 18 Dec 2016

Reviewer: Abigail Hatcher

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This manuscript examines an important topic, namely how pregnant patients in Guinea-Bissau accessed or were inhibited from accessing PMTCT services. There are, however, a number of issues that need to be addressed to prepare the manuscript for publication.

Introduction

1. In the Introduction, the fourth paragraph (lines 118 to 123) seems to suggest that the most recent national data around PMTCT was from 2008. If this is the case, it's important to state the paucity of data which makes it challenging to assess PMTCT over the past decade. If there is in fact data available that is more recent, it's essential to cite it.

Methods

2. These data were collected more than five years ago, which is not a problem if the authors explain why they are still relevant despite major shifts in PMTCT policy over this time period.

3. In line 143, briefly remind the reader what the WHO guidelines stated at the time regarding eligibility for access ART during pregnancy.

Results

4. In line 258, it would be important to add a quote or summarize participant stories to back up the finding that discrimination and abandonment were major concerns.

5. In line 271, please introduce the quote from Interview 14.
6. In line 287, the quote should read "talk to the patient with as few other people around as possible." Since these are translations into English, the grammar should be correct.

7. In line 314, note whether the lack of post-test counseling aligns with or contradicts national guidelines at the time of the interviews. I find it concerning that health workers blame women for their "lack of knowledge" when it is clearly a health systems gap which is leading to an inability of patients to access crucial information. Whenever possible, it would be wise for the authors to be critical of this judgmental health worker view, rather than accepting this dynamic as the patients' fault.

8. In line 320, the authors point out a very interesting association of testing with having a "good character". Please provide an illustrative quote or story.

9. In lines 340-342, several interesting considerations about partner and family dynamics are highlighted and these are deserving of an illustrative quote or story.

10. I would encourage the authors to consider removing the final Results section on supply-side barriers because it does not add much new richness to the argument. Alternately, it can be left in but requires considerable development with additional lines of reasoning and quotes. My sense is that the other sections of Results are stronger and add plenty to the manuscript without this final section.

Discussion

11. In line 418, I would say "perceived stigma at a household and community level".

12. In line 422, the authors say "Despite counseling and testing preceding the time point of most interviews…” But the data seem to point to a distinct lack of pre- and post-test counseling procedures. The Discussion needs to focus on what actually occurs in these settings, which seems to differ to international guidelines around how HIV testing and counseling should actually happen.

13. In lines 423-424, it does not seem appropriate to say "insufficient awareness" and "lack of HIV knowledge" given that these gaps in understanding are purely the result of an inattentive health system. No patient should be expected to educate themselves on a medical procedure, but should rather be provided with detailed information and ongoing counseling opportunities throughout their engagement with the health system. Please rephrase accordingly.

15. The paragraph in lines 454 would benefit from the addition of insights of ethnographic work on how traditional beliefs create meaning in difficult circumstances (Merten et al. 2010).

16. Please rewrite lines 480-481 and 483-484 as these seem to be sentence fragments.

Figures

17. Fig 2 would benefit from some grouping of the themes into various ecological levels: personal, household, institutional, community.

**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?**
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

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