Author's response to reviews

Title: Enhancing quality and integrity in biomedical research in Africa: An international call for greater focus, investment and standardisation in capacity strengthening for frontline staff

Authors:

Francis Kombe (Fkombe@kemri-wellcome.org)

Version: 6 Date: 20 September 2015

Author's response to reviews: see over
Author's response to reviews

Title: Enhancing quality and integrity in biomedical research in Africa: An international call for greater focus, investment and standardisation in capacity strengthening for frontline staff

Authors: Participants of an International Workshop in Kenya on the Role of Frontline Staff in Biomedical Research, July 2014

Version: 3

Date: 15th September 2015

Author's response to reviews: see over
Reviewer's report

Title: Enhancing quality and integrity in biomedical research in Africa: An international call for greater focus, investment and standardisation in capacity strengthening for frontline staff

Version: 3 Date: 24 June 2015

Reviewer: Paul Wenzel W Geissler

Reviewer's report:
Thank you for this opportunity to review a very interesting and well-written contribution on an important and timely subject: the role and training of fieldworkers, and their career prospects and opportunities. It should in my view be published, although I do have some comments and recommendations. None of these is compulsory, although I would think the paper would be strengthened by addressing the underlying structural issue, economic inequality (point 3).

1. The paper’s main point, that fieldworkers have a key role in ascertaining the ‘integrity’ of research, both in terms of data quality and in terms of acceptability and sustainability of research is very important and in agreement with much recent social science work on medical research in Africa. (The latter could be referenced slightly more broadly beyond the author’s colleagues.)

Response: More references have been added to support this point, including reference numbers 7 to 9

2. The point that this ‘expanded role’ and the fieldworker’s careers deserve more attention, also in terms of training, is well taken. This is a big problem, both in terms of career progression, and in terms of single-employer labour markets. However, I find the paper does not yet make as convincing case for the need to ‘standardise’ training and certification as it could do. In my view, the strongest argument in favour of this is the resulting inter-site mobility of field staff, and thus the opening of a broader labour market, transforming frontline staff from what they used to be – locally collected temporary ‘assistants’ – into an expert professional group with greater career opportunities and also with greater bargaining powers. This aspect could be developed a bit more. This relates to a key aspect of the fieldworker problem, namely that so far FWs have had very specific and short-term skills, that did not qualify them for anything beyond a particular study or site, and left largely dependent upon a localized collaboration (and external funds). Recognising their key role and giving certified training would partly make them more generally employable and thus less dependent upon one single, temporary employer. The author does make reference to this aspect on p.8, but this political could be emphasized more.

Response: We agree with the reviewer that this point could be emphasized more and have edited the manuscript under the section ‘Develop common areas of a core
curriculum for field worker capacity building to enhance quality of training processes’ on page 11, line 225 to 227 and line 231 to 234 to include the following sentences: (Line 225 to 227-A particular importance of this form of collaboration is in supporting multi-site studies that are increasingly common within Africa. Common areas for training could include knowledge about basic biology, research approaches and methods, research ethics and research regulatory frameworks. Common skills include those for data collection and documentation and – critically – (Line 231-234-‘soft’ skills such as respectful communication, and being aware of and managing ethical challenges and issues in practice. At the same time, some flexibility across such a joint curriculum would be important given differences in context across sites.

3. However, the big ‘elephant in the room’ that the paper does not explicate (and I do think it should, in order to make sense) is the underlying economic inequality that constitutes what sometimes is described as ‘frontline’. This ‘front’ is, ultimately, not science vs. lay, or global vs. local, but resource rich vs. poor. And the FWs are caught in between, bearing the brunt of the ethical and political and economic consequences of this underlying structural form of overseas medical research. I.e its not just about ethics, and a somewhat erroneous positioning of FWs ‘at the bottom of the pile’ that good training could rectify, but about real inequalities in which FWs indeed are at the bottom, or rather somewhere stuck in-between far down and the very bottom. While added technical knowledge and standardised curricula would not solve this underlying issue, I think the paper would gain much by spelling out that this is where much of the FW conundrum comes from. And while the interventions proposed here will improve some things, ‘frontline staff’ will still have to struggle with these basic structural challenges.

Response: Again we agree with the reviewer that this is an important point that should be recognised in the manuscript, although the analysis and strategies we set out in the paper are aimed directly at structural issues that we feel can be directly addressed in the short term. A sentence has been added on page 7/8 under the section, line 145 to 152 ‘FWs roles and training needs which states: In doing this, they play a central role within some of the poorest communities in rural Africa role as the frontline of often very well resourced international research institutions, creating tensions in understanding researchers’ and their own responsibilities to respond to important unmet needs within communities, and how this should be done. In doing so, their positions reflect a different and wider ‘frontline’ generated by global forms of structural inequity increasingly seen as an important ethical issue in international health research.15, 16

4. Finally a small point regarding the 4th recommendation, p.8: I think this recommendation could be subsumed under the previous ones, as it does not seem to add much, unless one would discuss here more the actual ‘broader vision’ that is needed, concerning the challenge of implementing scientific field research in a field of inequality

Response: We agree with the reviewer about the two points being linked, and have now merged these and edited the sections in line with the reviewers recommendations (see line 171 to 181).
Reviewer's report

Title: Enhancing quality and integrity in biomedical research in Africa: An international call for greater focus, investment and standardisation in capacity strengthening for frontline staff

Version: 3 Date: 8 July 2015

Reviewer: Joseph Ochieng

Reviewer's report:

Minor Essential Revisions

1. **Can the co-authors be listed with their contact information unless the journal has a limit on the number of authors to be listed?**
   
   Response: We have taken the strategy of including the names of conference participants at the end of the article instead of listing all the participants, as the number is huge.

2. **The abstract does not contain the results section which would help a reader to understand at a glance what the manuscript is about. Please include a results section in the abstract.**

3. **Additionally, the abstract does not have conclusions rather a discussion. This needs to be rectified.**

4. The methods section describes what happened during the workshop but falls short of explaining how the workshop discussions were analysed to form results for this manuscript. What type of analysis was used and how was the data analysed?

5. It is important to know if the data collection methods had any limitations.

6. The manuscript does not have a section to discuss results. Rather it reports findings from the workshop and recommendations by the workshop participants. It would be good to discuss these findings and recommendations which I think can be grouped together as results.

Responses: To respond to all the five comments above, and many of those of reviewer 3, we believe the main issue is a misunderstanding about the type of article we are hoping to publish. We hope that the manuscript will be published as an opinion piece in the correspondence section of the journal, and not as a research article. For this reason we have not followed the formatting normally used in a research article, including that:
• We have not presented methods in detail. Rather the letter describes consensus developed during the workshop through a series of information sharing and participatory activities that are now explained in more detail in the revised version under sections background to workshop and workshop activities on page 3 to 6 (line 63 to 118)

• We do not include a formal section on study limitations but have included a sentence on possible limitations as part of the discussion (line 275 to 277).

• The results and recommendations are presented under separate headings as outputs of the workshop, as advised by the reviewer (line 121, 154, 200).

7. It would also be good to have a link or an appendix in the methods section which would link the list of the participants to the methods section. This would solve the issue of listing the participants in the methods section.

   Response: The description of participants given under the methods section was meant to give an overview of the range of participants who attended the workshop, rather than a detailed list. An appendix of all the workshop participants grouped according to countries they represent is available on page 16 (line 326 to 352).

8. Authors' contributions appear twice as line 182 and line 196. In line 199, For the first time in the manuscript initials of some authors appears which is confusing. These initials need to be linked to names already mentioned in the manuscript.

   Response: This has been corrected. The first authors' contributions on line 301 was deleted and replaced with conflict of interest. The names of authors who were introduced for the first time were written in full (see line 317 to 319)
Reviewer's report

Title: Enhancing quality and integrity in biomedical research in Africa: An international call for greater focus, investment and standardisation in capacity strengthening for frontline staff

Version: 3 Date: 16 July 2015

Reviewer: Tracey Chantler

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revision:

1. I enjoyed reading this article and think that it covers a very important topic and makes some timely and appropriate recommendations. However I do not think that the content should be presented in the format of a research paper. It would be better to present this either as an opinion piece or a workshop review with a call for action.

   I think the paper could benefit from the following type of structure:

   a) Introduction: A summary of the topic are with reference to recent empirical research that had provided detailed insights into the work of frontline staff.

   b) The workshop: i) Genesis, purpose, participants, facilitation, how the workshop supported deliberation and consensus building ii) Content and how this was collated, and summarised ii) Key points and ensuing recommendations.

   c) Wider discussion: How do the workshop findings and recommendations compare with similar work, are these challenges specific to African settings, or do they speak to other settings, and what can be learnt from other settings. Is fieldworker training offered elsewhere, what is covered and how effective is this.

   Does fieldworker training need to be standardised or can local research centres develop their own. What will the consequence of professionalising the role of fieldworkers be? Will it make it less accessible for some people who have a less academic background but are well suited to demands of the work?

   d) What are the next steps: Plans for a next workshop, ideas for training that are being pursued. Collaboration with research trusts and academic institutes

   e) Conclusions

   Overall however, I would recommend the content for publication but in a different format and bearing in mind the suggestions outlined above. I realise that this depends on the discretion of the editor and the ability of the journal to cater for different types of papers.
Response: We really appreciate these very important comments made by the reviewer concerning the format of the article. However, based on previous communication with the senior editor of the journal and the advice we got about concentrating of the minor suggestions from the reviewers, we thought this reviewers suggestions were major and would lead to a significant change contrary to the editor’s advice.

Minor Essential Revisions

2. The introduction provides an overview of an important topic and highlights the need to pay closer attention to the role of fieldworkers in biomedical research and more specifically to their training needs. The article does not describe a research project hence there is not a defined research question. Instead it summarises deliberations from a workshop on the role of fieldworkers in biomedical research in Africa. This part of the paper could have been improved by providing some examples of some of the challenges field workers face in their work.

**Response:** This was addressed by editing the second paragraph under the introduction section and added some of the examples FWs experience on page 7 (line 135 to 140).

3. Are the methods appropriate and well described? Details are provided about the workshop but it is not clear how data was collected or collated from the workshop activities, and it would have been good to find out more about the different sessions that were run as part of this workshop and how participants were involved in leading, facilitating and contributing to these sessions.

**Response:** A more detailed description was given under the workshop activities in line with the reviewer’s recommendations (line 100 to 118).

4. Are the data sound? Key points are highlighted, although it is not clear how these have been selected, for example was this part of a ranking exercise during the workshop? It is also not usual to include references in the findings section of a research paper (another reason why I think this paper should not be published as a research paper but rather as an opinion piece or similar). Actually this findings from the workshop section’ is more a resume of discussions from the workshop that are collated in key points and recommendations. Some of the points that are highlighted need more explanation. E.g.: “There is a lack of standardisation of approaches to fieldworker capacity building across different research projects at individual institutions. This fragmentation has the potential to affect data integrity and cause confusion among participating communities.” Please make the link between the standardisation of fieldworker capacity building and data integrity and community understanding clearer.

**Response:** For the comment about the format of the article, please see our responses above concerning formatting of this manuscript as per editors advice. For the question on soundness of data, a more detailed description of the methods used during the workshop was given under the workshop activities section, line 104 to 118. About the sentence on lack of standardization, the sentence was deleted to make it clearer.

5. **Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?**

*There is not a separate discussion it is included in the findings part. The*
recommendations read well but I think they could be better grounded by a more detailed description of the challenges fieldworkers face in the findings section.
 Response: This has been addressed by the addition of examples of challenges, as described in our responses to the reviewers’ comment (Lines 131 to 140) under the Fieldworker’s roles and training needs section. The following sentences were added to make the section clearer: There was recognition that these are complex roles that include balancing of institutional roles and guidelines against the community expectations and fieldworkers’ personal interests. In this way, fieldworkers continuously make independent decisions on how to apply ‘ethical principles’ in reality. Examples of the ethical challenges fieldworkers were reported to face include dealing with silent refusals11 (participants who may not openly refuse to participation in research but indirectly avoid key study procedures), dealing with increasing demands for study benefits from community members who may or not necessarily be study participants and how to deal with study participants who may genuinely be in need of support which the study cannot offer9,12,13

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? No, these are not discussed.
 Response: Although this is not a research article, we have added a sentence on possible limitations in our discussion (lines 275 to 280)