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

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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.)

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.

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.

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.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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.