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:

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.

Minor Essential Revisions
1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? No, these are not discussed.

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.