**Reviewer’s report**

**Title:** The psychology of "cure" - unique challenges to consent processes in HIV cure research in South Africa

**Version:** 0 **Date:** 21 Jun 2018

**Reviewer:** Nicola Desmond

**Reviewer's report:**

This is a really interesting paper focused on the important question of ethics in informed consent processes as they relate to a specific research context - that of HIV cure research in the South African setting. What I really liked about this paper is the emphasis on the need to focus what is a universally driven approach to ethical practice through a standardised consent process on context driven issues and the need to highlight specific requirements entailed in the design and concept of particularly ethically challenging study. This type of formative research to inform practical ethics in medical research should be adopted more widely.

**Background** - this section is relatively short but adequately summarises the current literature and recognises that there have been a few recent publications on this issue in recent years, highlighting the high risk nature of HIV cure research. The authors correctly identify the dearth in literature on the ethics of this type of research in non-western (non-US) settings and the need for such work due to the special circumstances, particularly in explaining the concepts of cure research, in settings with generalised epidemics and the search for cure as a social practice in response to His amongst individuals in such settings. The paper does, however, not expand this, although the authors state the need to do so, to framing their findings within a context where seeking HIV 'cure' is already a common concept such as through traditional medicine or religious belief. The potentially increased risks of raising expectations where such pre-existent social and psychological responses prevail cannot be overemphasised along with the increased risks related to potential irregular use of HAART with the promise of a cure. The paper, does however, emphasise the ethical imperative to ensure that those conducting HIV cure trials take account of such concerns as the meaning of cure in the trial setting.

**Methods** - these are clearly described and show evidence of attention to the requirement for optimised reliability and validity of the qualitative data, describing in detail both the data collection approach using purposive sampling and the rationale for this and the data analysis approach in detail. I was slightly confused as to why the fact that the respondents with international profiles might enhance the external validity of results. This is not explained,
particularly as the research itself is content focused on South Africa. A further sentence to explain the authors thinking on this might be useful here.

Results - The six themes described in the results clearly demonstrate the range of concerns of key stakeholders in future cure research. What is perhaps missing is some indication of how responses to each of these themes differ according to the particular background of the participants e.g. do biomedical researcher concerns reflect those of ethics personnel or those of the community? More comparison across groups might help to shed more light on how the findings can be directly translated into an ethical process of informed consent. The research would benefit from (and I'm sure this is planned by the researchers) greater investigation into the key concepts and the way these might be framed from the perspective of the community to ensure consistent interpretation of the meaning of some challenging concepts to communicate in HIV cure research. This need is hinted at by the authors in the discussion, however.

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?
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Yes

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