Reviewer's report

Title: A qualitative analysis of the barriers and facilitators to HIV counselling and testing amongst adolescents in South Africa

Version: 2

Date: 11 February 2015

Reviewer: Angela Obasi

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Review of MS: 6495692341452881 “A qualitative analysis of the barriers and facilitators to HIV counselling and testing amongst adolescents in South Africa Michael R Strauss, Bruce D Rhodes and Gavin George BMC Health Services Research (Section: Health services research in low and middle income settings)"

DETAILED REVIEW

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

The paper addresses an issue of real importance, especially in this high HIV prevalence setting. It is particularly topical given recent policy recommendations in South Africa.

However, the background section is overly long, such that first reference to the research question does not actually appear until 3 pages into the main manuscript (page 6, line 22) and the research question itself is not fully formulated until page 10 (line 5).

Substantial editing of the background is needed to make the paper acceptable to the target audience.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

This study is nested within a larger study. More information is needed about the overall distribution of the schools and the sampling frame from which participants were randomly selected – in particular, age distribution- class/year group.

3. Are the data sound?

The data do appear to be sound although this is more difficult to gauge with purely qualitative studies than quantitative data.

4. Do the figures appear to be genuine, i.e. without evidence of manipulation?

There are no figures

5. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

This is unclear from the manuscript I have received and should be checked by the editorial team

6. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported
by the data?
No. See detailed comments in points 7 and 10 below

7. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
COMPULSORY REVISION

The authors make no attempt to identify or discuss any limitations in this work. This is particularly regrettable as there are indeed significant limitations which must be addressed before this manuscript can be accepted for publication. In particular:

1. The fact that this study is nested within a larger VMMC study and the impact that this may have on participant responses should be explored.

2. The impact of an exclusively male research team on responses from adolescent female respondents should be discussed and a rationale for not using same sex facilitators which is now standard practice should also be given.
(Further issues are detailed in point 10 below)

8. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

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Unable to assess

9. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
No.
COMPULSORY REVISION

The title should specify that barriers are being identified from the adolescents’ perspectives only. No provider perspectives are presented.

The results component of the abstract should be revised-
# Firstly “lack of” should be inserted in front of the words “confidentiality” and “knowledge”.
# Secondly, the key finding that confidentiality supersedes convenience should be presented as this is an interesting and important point with significant and practicable implications for implementation.

10. Is the writing acceptable?

This paper requires substantial revision before it can be accepted.
As stated above, the Background is overlong and circuitous. Important details relating to specific developments in South African policy should be retained but I would suggest that the following be addressed before the manuscript is accepted.

COMPULSORY REVISIONS AS FOLLOWS

1. Page 5 para 1(lines 2-8) does not add much to the argument and should be removed.
2. Page 5 para 2- line 13 the peer reviewed reference to Project ACCEPT published in the Lancet Global Health would be a more appropriate reference.

3. Page 6 para 2- (lines 7-17) contains superfluous detail that should be summarised in a brief sentence and appended to the previous paragraph.

4. Similarly, page 6 para 3 (lines 19-23) and page 7 para 1 (lines 1-8) should be edited to be presented more succinctly.

5. The text from Page 7 Para 2 “Barriers and Facilitators....” to page 10 para 1- should be condensed to one or two paragraphs and a link made between this information and how the theoretical framework is applied and the FGD tools drafted. Some of the research cited in these pages should more appropriately feed into the discussion. Otherwise, much of the information in page 7- page 10 appears to pre-empt the study findings without the authors making clear how this information has either informed their study design, or how their findings relate to it.

6. Page 10- para 2- whilst the attempt to reference and utilise a theoretical framework is laudable, the application of this framework in the research is unconvincing. No detail is given about how the framework was used in formulating the FGD tools, nor is any reference made to self-efficacy in the discussion section.

7. The research fails to reference the specific developmental, social and cultural factors that make intervention among adolescents particularly difficult. (see also 8 bullet point 3, below)

8. The results contain tantalising insights that could be better articulated and explored:

   # The conceptualisation for sources of fear as primary “getting bad news” and secondary “being stigmatised by being seen in the queue for testing” is novel, but under developed.

   # Stigma is clearly an important underlying and cross cutting barrier. A single summary paragraph capturing this is needed rather than the argument that is currently scattered

   through the results section. A figure conceptualising its relationship to other secondary barriers would also be helpful and allow better articulation of those secondary factors. (Inclusion of the figure is not compulsory but is recommended)

   # There is an unsophisticated presentation of some of the data: e.g. p 17 lines 21- what the authors interpret as peer support may include an element of peer pressure which should be explored- especially in this adolescent context.

9. Some comments in the results section pre-empt or would be better placed in the discussion e.g. p 21 para 4 (lines 14-17).

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English: Acceptable