Reviewer's report

Title: Endurance, resistance and resilience in the South African health care system: a comparative case study to demonstrate mechanisms of coping within a transforming system

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Reviewer: Natalie Leon

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Reviewer comments
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Endurance, resistance and resilience in the South African health care system: a comparative case study to demonstrate mechanisms of coping within a transforming system

This article addresses an important and under-investigated area of health systems by focussing on ‘issues of access to health care and how patients and health care providers cope with the health care system’s realities’. It aims to show, through four individual ‘cases/narratives, the coping mechanisms employed by users and provider of health services in a setting with a range of individual, institutional and societal stressors. The method used (focussing on 4 cases and providing more context and depth to the individual/case level analysis) aims to show the complex intra-and interpersonal dynamics of coping. The findings provide insights into the complexity of coping, and the interaction between individual, societal and institutional influences on coping with accessing and delivering on health needs, in a poor socio-economic setting with sub-optimal health service delivery. The focus of the paper is therefore highly topical as it can inform on important and difficult questions such as why some patients are apparently ‘non-compliant’ with medical advice and jeopardizing of their health, and why health services are experienced as non-responsive to patient needs.

However, as interesting as the topic is, the paper in its current form would require Major compulsory revisions (MCR) to meet the standards of a publishable article.

The main areas for MCR, are in terms structure and coherence.

1. The paper does not follow the format of what one would consider a standard BMC Health Services article, where the Background, Methods, Findings, Discussion and Conclusion usually have clear focus in terms of aims for each section, and where there is a coherent and balanced relationship between these sections, irrespective of the research method (be it qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods). (see details below).
2. The focus of the paper is not entirely in line with the Title. The title and the initial section of the Background indicates that the focus will be coping with a ‘transforming’ health system, but this emphasis on ‘transformation’ is not consistent and does not appear to be a feature of the findings or Discussion.

3. The title also refers to a comparative element and it is unclear what is being compared; is it patient and provider experiences or different coping styles or another aspect?

4. Background: In particular, there needs to be more of a balance between the Background section and the rest of the sections. The aim and focus of the background section should be revised. Currently its length, content and style of writing resembles that of a Viewpoint or Discussion article which could potentially stand on its own, without presenting the findings. This has the effect of the findings almost being redundant, because the arguments have already been presented and concluded in a particular way.

5. My senses is that the scope of the Background section is too wide and this together with the writing style, detracts from the value it can add to the paper. In particular, the authors quote too extensively from too many sources, and it is not always clear what value this adds (also in the Methods section). In the process, the reader’s attention is distracted from the focus and coherence of the arguments set out by the authors.

6. It would be useful if the background section could focus more clearly on i) identifying the problem area of interest, ii) stating succinctly what is known about the problem area, iii) what is not known/gaps in our knowledge and iv) how this study aims to address the gap/advance knowledge.

7. Related to the points 5 & 6 above, the writing style throughout the paper, but particularly in the Background section, makes it difficult for the reader to ascertain when the authors are setting up an argument of their own (and using references in support of this) and when they are referring to sources to show what work has been done in the area. This challenge of distinguishing the ‘voice’ of the authors is also present in the Findings and Discussion sections.

8. The link between the background, findings and Discussion should be more coherent and systematic. Currently some ideas in the Background section would be more appropriate for a Discussion section. The Discussion section should focus on adding value to the findings; by highlighting the main messages coming through, offering own (author) interpretation with reference to understanding of context, theoretical understanding; and showing how findings add or detract from existing theory and evidence, and the implications of the findings for theory/practice/policy.

9. Discussion: Similarly, the aim of the Discussion section is not clear at present. Whilst it may be appropriate to introduce new findings/ narratives in this section, it should not be done at the expense of adding value to the Findings, as
described in point 8 above.

10. Methods: This require more succinct detail on basic information provided in a Method section (setting, sample selection, participant recruitment, data collection tools e.g. scope & duration of interview and data analysis processes) and less focus on the details of the analytic framework.

11. Further, I am unsure if it is appropriate to refer to the case-study and narrative approach as analytical framework in itself, as opposed to a methodological approach to data gathering and analysis.

12. What would add value is to have and analytic/conceptual framework that presents a particular theoretical approach to understanding ‘coping’ from the perspective of concepts such as ‘endurance, resilience and resistance’. The findings and discussion could then offer more depth in terms of how they illustrate (or not), the dynamics of these coping strategies. The background section described work some of the work, but does not offer one or a combined conceptual framework to guide the analysis more systematically.

13. Findings: The selected cases provide an interesting and rich description of various coping strategies. The coherence of the findings can be improved by framing each case in terms of what elements of coping it aims to illustrate and to indicate how the four selected cases are meant to complement each other and what comparative issues are being illustrated.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare I have no competing interest