Reviewer’s report

Title: Strengthening referral systems in community health programs: a qualitative study in two rural districts of Maputo Province, Mozambique

Version: 0 Date: 09 Sep 2018

Reviewer: Judy Taylor

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Review BMJ Health Services Research

BHSR-D-18-01432

Strengthening referral systems in community health programs: a qualitative study in two rural districts of Maputo Province, Mozambique

Thank you for asking me to review this article. This is an important topic because of the opportunity to focus on community and community health worker perspectives on ways to improve referral practices in primary health care. There is a difficult balance between enablers and barriers as the area is complex. It is a very broad area but the authors have handled this well.

Overall comments.

1. There is a need for some theory or concepts, perhaps from complex health systems to underpin the findings about the barriers to the referral system and how they might be overcome. The need is for several reasons - to systematize knowledge produced from this study and enable it to be transferred to similar settings. There are several areas where concepts might be applied: The central role of CHW in facilitating linking between health sectors, related to this is communication, and then the issue of trust and community ownership which seems strong. What are the health systems concepts which have been used with these themes? - Gilson on trust and communication is just one example - Gilson L Editorial: building trust and value in health systems in low- and middle-income countries, Social Science and Medicine https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2004.11.059


Method;
2. Are the interviewers from the community or are they external? Were the interviews in languages other than English and so were they transcribed and analysed in English?
Analysis
3. The text search in NVIVO is useful but only if the searches are for the appropriate words. Often, as I am sure you found, the words in interview questions are not those used locally.

4. Are the sociodemographic characteristics to be used in the analysis? Otherwise it is unclear as to what they mean.

Results
5. It would be interesting to have some overall view about the extent of people's (CHW and community members) perceptions that referral slips were not being used properly. Was this the majority or just a few?

Discussion:
6. These data identify that the perceptions about the role of the CHW as systems linking people was very important -Other studies referred to in your paper have similar findings. The last four paragraphs in the discussion are a good attempt to generalize your findings but I think some further health systems concepts are necessary here. Gilson on trust (above) perhaps.

7. In addition the mention of community engagement is important but as often occurs the in-depth analysis about exactly what this might achieve and how it would be done -using some concepts would be helpful. Farnsworth et al. Community Engagement to Enhance Child Survival and Early Development in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: An Evidence Review, Journal of Health Communication, 19:67-88, 2014 DOI: 10.1080/10810730.2014.941519 have done a review on community engagement in strengthening maternal and child health. Are there any concepts from this?

Best wishes
Judy Taylor

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?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes
Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

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