Author’s response to reviews

Title: The HIV self-testing debate: Where do we stand?

Authors:

Marilou Gagnon (marilou.gagnon@uottawa.ca)
Martin French (martin.french@concordia.ca)
Yamilee Hébert (yhebe065@uottawa.ca)

Version: 1 Date: 16 Dec 2017

Author’s response to reviews:

RESPONSE
This is an interesting and well-written commentary analyzing the debate on HIV self-testing. However, there are some important methodological issues that need to be addressed and the rationale for this approach should be further explained.

Detailed comments

Background

• Please identify in the background section who are the players involved in this debate. If HST has not been “widely touted in the field of HIV”, who is promoting it and why?

Response: The players were identified in the background section.

• Please clarify who is referred to in the sentence “demand for new policies…etc.” and "a call for massive scale-up…" and provide citations for these "calls for scale up" that have merged in recent years and months.

Response: This was clarified.

• Please explain the statement "...HST has never been widely endorsed in the field of HIV..."? What about the 2016 WHO self-testing guidelines?

Response: The sentence was changed significantly. This no longer applies.
• Please clarify what is meant by "self-testing continues to be debated?" What aspects of the intervention are debated? Accuracy? Acceptability? Feasibility? Merits of HST? Ethical implications?

Response: This was clarified.

• Please clarify the reference to a "lack of compelling evidence". What is lacking? Evidence of acceptability? Evidence of actual uptake? Evidence of effectiveness in reaching the first 90 (i.e. in reaching undiagnosed HIV infected persons)? Please clarify the type of evidence that is missing. This lack of empirical evidence could perhaps be more prominently noted as a central "purpose" for the importance of this paper.

Response: The sentence was changed significantly. This no longer applies.

Method


Response: Additional details on the method were included (including one table and two figures). The typology of reviews was helpful to add to the description of the method. We did not produce tables where arguments for and against are presented because our analysis and findings challenges binary ways of presenting arguments – that is why we focused on lines of arguments. In order to help illustrate this more clearly, the original figure was revised.

• Please provide empirical evidence to support the view that there has been a significant change in support for self-testing over time using either a standard analytic method or could through a supplementary table indicating the level of support of each article reviewed, which would make clear that the level and/or number of supportive articles increased over time.

Response: A figure showing number of publications in our sample over time has been added to the method section. The view that there has been changed over time is supported by our analysis. It cannot be clearly illustrated using a figure because the literature is not easily divided into
papers for and papers against HST. Most papers, especially the ones addressing the ethical issues of HST, included arguments on both sides of the debate. It would be impossible to categorize them as exclusively supportive or not.

• Please consider other relevant papers in the field such as: Myers, J. E., El-Sadr, W. M., Zerbe, A., & Branson, B. M. (2013). Rapid HIV self-testing: long in coming but opportunities beckon. Aids, 27(11), 1687-1695.

Response: This article was part of our sample. Not all articles were cited in the manuscript. It was added to the background section.

Findings

• Pages 5-6 Target - Market argument: Please explain how or what strategies should or could be used to target those who are most likely to benefit from HIV-self testing

Response: This falls beyond the scope of the review. The goal was to map out arguments presented and not synthesize recommendations on how to reach certain target populations with HST – this would merit its own analysis and broader search of the literature. The specific focus of the target-market line of argument was to highlight how certain populations were positioned in the literature with respect to HST and issues related to this.

• Page 9, Line 30-31: Please explain the terms 'exceptionalism' and 'normalization'.

Response: An explanation was provided.

• Page 5, Lines 24-34: It would be good to include a line on the reasoning behind why HST should be followed by confirmatory testing.

Response: A sentence was added to explain this.

• Please consider including data on the increase in the number of papers published that discuss or empirically assess HIV self-testing over the years to bolster the claims around the increase in support absent clear empirical evidence (lines 39-44)
Response: There is a disconnect between the lines indicated here (lines 39-44) and the comment. To address this comment more generally, a figure was added in the method section. A note that this comment overlaps with the feedback provided in the method section, second bullet.