Reviewer's report

Title: Using a human resource management approach to support community health workers: experiences from five African countries

Version: 2 Date: 10 February 2015

Reviewer: James Buchan

Reviewer's report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined? Yes
2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work? Yes, to a point
3. Are the data sound and well controlled? OK
4. Do the figures appear to be genuine, i.e. without evidence of manipulation? OK
5. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? OK
6. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? OK, to a point, see below
7. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? OK
8. Is the writing acceptable? OK

Major Compulsory Revisions

Overall this is an interesting paper that explores important territory that is currently under-researched- As such it is "exploratory" which brings limitations in generalising findings; these are generally acknowledged but there are some aspects that require some re-drafting to make the paper acceptable for publication:

1) One key issue is that CHW are "different" from employed workers- they are more likely to live locally, have different motivations etc. The paper does identify this issue but does not fully follow through on its implications. I think there are three dimensions which require some more discussion/ acknowledgement in the paper

i) to the extent they are recruited locally they are already embedded in the community, so some measures of retention will be much different from "formal" employed workers who have to be recruited into the community from other locales- how is this identified, what does it mean for retention/ attrition/ turnover measures, and what does it mean for working relationships between formal workers [including the line supervisors?] and the CHW?

ii). the paper mentions workforce development at various places, but this is presumably a sub set of the "performance management" intervention area [one of the three identified]- this needs more careful delineation/ description- what
does p.m. require, and where does development "fit"

iii) towards the end of the paper, it notes that, usually, not all workforce expectations can be met- yet this is not worked through in the earlier stages when much is made about the need to meet expectations- when obviously the paramount challenge for management is to deliver services, whilst managing realistic expectations, and managing down any that are unrealistic through effective communication etc- again, this needs more careful delineation and discussion

2) more needs to be made and discussed about the differences or similarities in managing CHW and other "formal" staff- on page 4 it is argued that "good management" for formal can be replicated, but surely there are major differences- some of which are alluded to- eg fewer/ different levers for managing performance which need to be identified more clearly

3) more needs to be made about a factor linked to 2 above- the additional challenge to managers, IT systems, planning, policy about running "parallel systems" with different staff on different types of contractual arrangement etc-in essence the authors suggest that a solution is "joint management" and "bolting on"HRM [p20]- but this reads, potentially, like adding other layers to the complexity and/ or and short termism- some more reflections on the issue and what to do about it would be helpful

4) the limitation of only one site per country in five countries needs to be teased out a bit more in terms of what this means for the conclusions; there is also a need to be clearer about the reporting of some of the findings- the summary tables 3,4,5 do not link to specific country examples-were these common findings across all 5 sites or is there a need to delineate/ differentiate?

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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

Declaration of competing interests:
'I declare that I have no competing interests'