Reviewer’s report

Title: To what extent is the Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder considered in policy-related documents in South Africa? A document review

Version: 0 Date: 08 Nov 2018

Reviewer: Sarah Roberts

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this paper. Understanding the policy landscape related to fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and alcohol use during pregnancy more broadly is an important topic, especially in places with very high rates of FAS. Documenting the changes in publicly-available policy documents related to FAS and alcohol use during pregnancy in South Africa over the past decade is a worthwhile endeavor and is a key public health contribution. There are a number of concerns that dampen my enthusiasm for the manuscript in its current form. In addition to needing to be edited for clarity and organization, there are a number of substantive concerns that I present below.

1) The introduction is too broad and includes a lot of details, some of which seem to contradict each other. These contradictions raise questions about the attention to detail and ability to synthesize information of the authors, which then raises questions about the credibility of the analysis.

2) A much narrower introduction would improve the manuscript. Specifically, rather than a broad introduction about FAS and alcohol use in general, the introduction should focus on 1) FAS in South Africa; 2) the policy environment in South Africa - i.e. how are policies made in South Africa in general? and what is the role of policy documents? do they have weight or resources behind them? do policy documents actually indicate action? why look at policy documents as opposed to some other indicator of policy (and practice), i.e. what is the significance of looking at policy documents? 3) Previous research on policy documents in South Africa; 4) why this updated study is needed

3) In the methods, what do you define as a policy document? how do you know that something is a policy document v. something else?

4) why would a policy document be in pubmed?

5) how many South African national and provincial departments did you search? and which types of departments?
6) the authors searched for foetus, but fetus is spelled differently in different places; I'm not sure that searching google or pubmed without fetus will get all of the relevant documents

7) I don't understand the 2nd inclusion bullet - how do you know if something could be attributed to FASD? would women's alcohol use in general count?

8) What is the difference between targeted and blanket?

9) The PRISMA guidelines seem inappropriate for this type of review; there is so little detail on inclusion v. exclusion criteria as well as details on how far down in the google search engines the authors went that adding this flow chart in gives a veneer of methodological rigor that isn't matched by the other components of what is presented

10) I don't understand how the coding process worked. Was the analysis only of the specifically coded chunks of the document that referred specifically to FAS? or the whole document?

11) Was there any analysis of the weight of the document? i.e. whether there were any resources attached to it or evidence of implementation? or just whether FAS was mentioned?

12) what does DRX mean in terms of data management?

13) I appreciate the themes presented in the results, but it is hard to know what to do with them without more information about the significance of the documents themselves - i.e. are they aspirational? or are they reports on actions? perhaps the authors could add a section to the results explaining the significance of the types of policy documents

14) The discussion seems too broad - it is making larger claims about what should happen in South African policy rather than discussing the specific contributions of this manuscript and how it fits in with previous knowledge. The larger claims do not follow from the particular analysis presented

15) The conclusion does not follow from the study - it is a larger claim that is not about the conclusions from the research conducted for this manuscript.
Level of interest
Please indicate how interesting you found the manuscript:

An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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

Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

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