

Reviewer's report

Title: Contextual influences on health worker motivation in district hospitals in Kenya

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Reviewer: Hugh Reyburn

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This is an interesting study of healthworker motivation in Kenyan district hospitals. The quality of care in Kenyan hospitals has already been shown by the same group to be disturbingly poor. The second and third paragraphs in the background suggest that this study will differ from others in relating motivation to the effect of an intervention; while this may be the case within the context of the group of papers being presented from this work it is not really the case for this particular paper that provides more of a baseline assessment without reference to current performance or response to the intervention.

The methods are generally clear. Qualitative data were collected using notes and tapes (although its not stated which was used for which type of data) and later analysed using thematic codes. Language and translation are not mentioned, presumably all in Swahili? The lead author conducted the interviews, small group discussions and FGDs and was responsible for the coding although its not stated if a sample of data was independently validated by a second researcher. The sampling strategy was convenience which I think is appropriate.

In the results the numbers of FGDs and KII are shown but it would be helpful to see the categories of staff interviewed as there is a tendency for nurses to be more available than other staff. Also I think it would help to see a summary of the themes identified for each category of staff to give a more quantitative feel for the findings although I understand that this is being done in a separate paper.

Given what's known of Kenyan hospitals and African hospitals generally its unsurprising that morale seemed to be low and the authors have taken care to present a balance of positive findings (eg examples of good communication or management).

Early in the results its stated that staff reported being generally motivated by altruism and professionalism but few or none of the quotes seem to confirm this (e.g. nobody said 'its tough and the pay is bad but I still love my job...'). The theme of disillusion re-emerges under 'unmet expectations' with older staff reporting deteriorating conditions and loss of idealism and younger staff appearing cynical or resigned from early in their career. It's a worrying finding but I wonder how much is based on salary and how much on other issues. Is there any evidence that healthworker pay and conditions have fallen behind other groups in the last 10-20 years in Kenya? The information may not be easily

available but some background on salary and staff levels either in the methods or early in the results would be useful.

A number of quotes suggest that motivation might have varied quite a lot between different grades but this is not specifically referred to in the results or discussion. The different perspective of COs and MDs seemed particularly striking (COs feeling downtrodden, undervalued and with poor career prospects). In the results its difficult to see how many MDs were included in the study and whether they were generally more optimistic or satisfied with their position. Quotes from the COs suggest they might well be. I think the points about lack of career structure for COs are highly relevant and concord with studies in Tanzania (Chandler et al, submitted 2008).

The theme of 'justice' is included as a subheading and also emerged strongly under other headings (MDs getting higher transport allowance for the same journey, MDs getting paid not to do private work, hospitals generating income but still providing poor conditions for staff, salary rises favouring senior staff etc) but receives little attention in the discussion. Without seeing the original data its hard to make a judgement but I wonder if this theme deserves more space. A sense of injustice seems likely to cause resentment even if pay or conditions have improved overall.

I think the authors have done well to tease out issues that can be separated from pay and conditions as (at least in my experience) financial issues tend to dominate interviews with health staff, itself evidence that a sense of work pride and professionalism may be missing. The motivational effects of management, leadership, communication and career structures are well made in the discussion and are areas where improvements can be made without large salary increases.

Overall I think this is a well written paper that makes a significant addition to this important and neglected subject.

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

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 I have no competing interest