Reviewer’s report

Title: Social autopsy: Providing evidence on failures in the pathway to survival, and increasing awareness to empower communities and engage health programs

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Reviewer: Chalapati Rao

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The manuscript provides perspective on the added value of enquiries into social and behavioural determinants of mortality (social autopsy), to complement conventional approaches to ascertain the biological causes of death in the community setting in developing countries (verbal autopsy). The paper attempts to review previous and current experience in such enquiries, and highlights the development of an integrated verbal/social autopsy (VASA) methodology which is scheduled for implementation at the national or sub national level in African countries.

In general, the methods and benefits of ‘social autopsy’ for maternal and child health programs are well known. Also, none of the studies included in the review meet the inclusion criteria of representativeness or ‘large area’; either in terms of geography; or sizeable sample size. This is not unusual, since ‘social autopsy’ enquiries till date have been implemented as research studies, rather than through routine data collection programs. Hence, the detailed review of individual studies only serves to underscore the utility of such data collection, and could be summarised.

Major Revisions

I suggest that the manuscript should preferably be recast as a commentary on the need for social autopsy in the light of various issues in its implementation. The commentary could focus on the following issues:

1. Till date, social autopsy has mainly been implemented in the area of maternal and child health, and not for a routine enquiry into population level cause-specific mortality; which is the main driver for implementation of verbal autopsy in developing countries.

2. The article could present a concise summary of the specific experience in implementing social autopsy in different countries; to accompany Table 1. The detailed methodology of and findings from individual studies can be followed up through the references.

3. A note of the potential quantitative bias in all these studies should be made, since there is no information (at least from this review) of the actual generalisability of the study sample to the overall mortality in the study areas, to be able to infer the generalisability of findings regarding social determinants.
4. Nevertheless, despite the absence of generalisability from a statistical perspective, the studies have identified social determinants along with specific examples of uses of such information, which indicates the utility and benefits from these investigations; and this point should be highlighted.

5. The authors should discuss the potential for extending such enquiry into TB, HIV, suicide and other injuries. The manuscript could comment on the potential value/limitation of social autopsy for NCDs.

6. The manuscript should discuss the considerable challenges in implementing integrated verbal / social autopsy interviews at the population level; in terms of availability /training of human resources; community participation (length of interview, negotiating feelings of guilt/shame in respondents, regarding failure to prevent death etc), and challenges in data analysis.

7. The manuscript could make the case for nested social autopsy projects as follow up case studies based on a selected representative sample of deaths from biological causes determined through verbal autopsy. This will remove the potential for sensitivity and stigma from the social autopsy component that could influence the disclosure of information related to the biological ‘VA’ component of the interview. At the same time, the follow up study will provide opportunity for separate specialised training of interviewers; a more elaborate informed consent process; strengthen the quantitative inferences on social determinants, all through judicious use of available human, financial and technical resources.

**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 that I have no competing interests