

Reviewer's report

Title: The Internet for weight control in an obese sample: results of a randomised controlled trial

Version: 1 **Date:** 12 February 2007

Reviewer: Cliona Ni Mhurchu

Reviewer's report:

General

This is an interesting paper that describes the findings of a randomised, controlled trial to evaluate the effectiveness of an internet intervention for weight loss. The study design is sound and the findings are well reported. Internet-based health interventions are still evolving and, as such, this study makes an important contribution to the overall area.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Abstract, Results, Line 5: The word "secondary" appears to be missing (in relation to outcome measures)

Abstract, Results, Line 7: Add units for costs (per person/year?)

Methods, Page 4, Paragraph 2: Where were the baseline and follow-up appointments held? At a clinic or in the study participants' homes? This has a bearing on the high rate of study attrition.

Methods, Page 5, Paragraph 3: Was the internet intervention piloted and pre-tested with consumers? This has a bearing on consumer uptake of the intervention.

Methods, Page 5, Paragraph 3: How was the internet advice personalised (based on age, sex, ethnicity, previous weight loss attempts, preferences for specific modules etc)? What questions were used to elicit relevant information? Can an example of how motivational statements were tailored to participants be given?

Methods, Page 7, Paragraph 4: Please state how missing values were accounted for in your primary ITT analysis. The text currently only lists this for secondary analyses.

Results, Page 8, Paragraph 1 and Table 1: It is not usual to include p-values in a baseline table since randomisation means that any imbalances can only have occurred by chance. I suggest you remove the p-values from the text and table. In addition, I have never seen a 95% confidence interval for a p-value. Please explain in your methods why the mean is provided for some baseline values (e.g. weight) and the median for others (e.g. BMI).

Results, Page 9, Paragraph 1, Line 3: I think the authors have transposed the "usual care" and "internet" follow-up rates here.

From my reading of this paper, the lack of engagement of the study participants with the internet intervention is a major failing. I think this aspect along with the lack of pre-testing and piloting of the intervention with consumers (if this was the case) should be discussed more thoroughly in the Discussion and Conclusions of the paper along with suggestions as to how such engagement might be improved in future internet-based interventions.

Even with increased consumer engagement in future interventions the possible lack of internet access by the whole UK population (particularly low-income and ethnic minority groups) means that such interventions may be more effective for well-educated, high income groups and, thus, increase potentially disparities in

obesity and health.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Background, Paragraph 1, Line 2: Environmental factors such as the ready availability of cheap energy dense foods, cars and other labour-saving devices also play a role in impeding weight loss and merit mention.

Background, Paragraph 2, Line 2: Are there known ethnic or socioeconomic disparities in internet access in the UK? Suggest you clarify if so.

Are there data available on what methods of weight loss the "usual care" group used? It would be helpful to include these data in the paper in order to better gauge what the true intervention comparison was.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

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