Reviewer's report

Title: End-of-life practices in Danish ICUs: development and validation of a questionnaire

Version: 1 Date: 14 May 2012

Reviewer: J. Randall Curtis

Reviewer's report:

General comments: This manuscript describes the development and initial validation of a survey to assess practices for withholding and withdrawing life support. It describes a series of studies that were well designed and conducted and provides useful information about the development of this survey.

Specific comments:

1. Terminology: The term “withholding and withdrawing therapy” should be changed to “withholding or withdrawing life support” or “withholding or withdrawing life-sustaining therapy” since some palliative therapies should be continued.

2. Abstract, methods: The abstract needs some more details on how agreement, reliability and validity were assessed.

3. Abstract, results: The abstract needs some more details of the specific results.

4. Background, 2nd paragraph, page 3: The sentence starting “Apart from the Danish population…” is confusing and should be clarified.

5. Methods, 2nd paragraph, page 4: The authors should clarify whether ICU A and B were in one hospital. Are these ICUs different than ICU I and ICU II.

6. Methods, 3rd paragraph, page 5: The phrase “in close cooperation with teachers in questionnaire quality” should be deleted and replaced with references citing the specific methods used.

7. Methods, page 6, 3rd paragraph: The phrase “patients in the ward they could not transfer to the ICU” should clarify whether this means patients that the primary physicians wanted to transfer but were refused an ICU bed by intensivists.

8. Methods, page 6, 5th paragraph: The authors should define how they assessed each of the following: face and content validity, reproducibility, reliability and agreement, responsiveness”. These terms are used differently by different investigators and this should be specified. The table 1 definitions are too general and a more operational definition should be included for how these concepts were tested for this manuscript.
9. Methods, page 7, 3rd paragraph: It is not clear how the results were compared to other studies or countries. This should be specified.

10. Methods, page 8, paragraph 1: I would argue that the authors do not assess responsiveness, but rather they are assessing “discriminant validity” or “known groups validity”. Responsiveness implies that the intervention is “responsive” to an intervention to improve quality of care and the authors did not assess this. Just because the two ICUs could be discriminated, doesn’t mean the measure could detect improvement within one ICU.

11. Methods, page 8, 2nd paragraph: The authors should provide more details about how the survey in 10 ICUs was conducted.

12. Results, page 9, 1st section: The “participants” section has a confusing structure and should be rewritten.

13. Results, page 9, last paragraph: The number of pages in Word is not a standard unit since will vary with font and formatting. Consider using the number of words.

14. Results, page 10, “Agreement”: It would be useful to quantitate the proportion of participants who changed responses by moving one step up or down, since this gets mentioned again in the discussion.

15. Results, page 10 “Agreement”: The phrase “had no unambiguous direction” doesn’t make sense to me and should be clarified.

16. Results, page 10, “Responsiveness”: As above, this shouldn’t be called “responsiveness”. Also, this is an interesting section and more details could be provided about the findings.

17. Discussion, page 12, 2nd paragraph: The phrase “hearing partners” doesn’t mean anything to me and should be clarified.

18. Discussion, page 13, 3rd paragraph: More details are needed about “in accordance with other studies”. In addition, if the authors want to discuss the comments by respondents, there should be some description in the methods of how these comments were analyzed and some description in the results of what was found.

19. Discussion, last paragraph: Again, more details are needed to support the statement that the authors’ findings correspond to surveys by others.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.
Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests'