Reviewer’s report

Title: Influences on recruitment to randomised controlled trials in mental health settings in England: a national cross-sectional survey of clinical studies officers working for the Mental Health Research Network

Version: 2  Date: 28 November 2013

Reviewer: Belinda Lennox

Reviewer’s report:

This is an interesting survey that is worthy of publication, and I have no major queries around the study design or data analysis. I have a few minor amendments and suggestions for changes.

The text needs a thorough edit, as there are numerous grammatical and syntactical errors, with frequent use of subclauses in sentences for instance p.4 "an area in which the conduct of trials needed to reduce the massive burden of disease is particularly challenging." Or tortologous statements such as p.9 "demonstrated that factors reported to influence recruitment in various contexts were, or had been, operational in NHS mental health services and were perceived to influence access to potential trial participants", or p.20 "recruitment to trials other than with which participants have been involved give rise to different recruitment challenges and opportunities"

The article lacked clarity as a result. The introduction and discussion also lacked focus. The summary overstates the findings from the data and the conclusions are not justified. The survey instead reflects the views of CSOs which is interesting and valid, but does not provide any other data to be able to say whether these views have any association with actual recruitment. So we do not know whether the CSOs reporting difficulty with culture and attitude amongst healthcare workers also recruited fewer patients as a result.

I found it interesting that the discussion focussed on the difficulties experienced with the gatekeepers, and what the clinical services should do to change, rather than the effectiveness of CSOs or the MHRN itself. After all, the NIHR was established by taking R and D money away from NHS clinical services and setting up a ringfenced separate entity. So the results of the survey could be seen as a necessary reflection of this separation, but the net effect has still been a huge increase in research activity in mental health services as a result.

I thought the positive suggestions from CSOs as to what was helpful in recruitment interesting, and in particular the comments about being more integrated into the clinical teams. Is it possible for the authors to stratify the responses depending on the level of integration of the CSOs to see whether this has a positive effect on their perception of the culture of the clinicians. So for
instance some CSOs had offices within clinical teams, and I would expect that their responses to the questions of engagement would be different.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**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