Reviewer's report

Title: Are the results of telephone interviews and self-administered questionnaires equivalent? Randomised controlled comparison of the standardised instruments SF-12 and GCPS

Version: 1 Date: 18 July 2007

Reviewer: Jan Passchier

Reviewer's report:

The report concerns a study on the equivalence of telephone interviews (TI) and self-administered questionnaires (SAQ). From the subtitle, it becomes clear that the investigation is restricted to the SF-12 and the Grade Chronic Pain Scale (GCPS). (NB: avoid abbreviations in the title). It was carried out in a large group of pain patients, participating in a study on the effect of acupuncture. Also the sequence of administration (TI and SAQ) was studied. The conclusion was that the measurement of mental status was affected by the survey mode but not the measurement of physical status.

The topic investigated is relevant from a methodological point of view. Most questionnaires are validated in a self-report form, but the administration is often carried out by telephone format. It is important to know if the two are equivalent.

Introduction
1.
From the three different independent variables (TI vs SAQ, order and information ahead of time), the last two are in the introduction section not sufficiently clarified. Why is ‘order or information ahead’ relevant for clinical or research practice, as generally only one way of administration is chosen? I can imagine that ‘gender’ is also a factor of interest, but this is not analysed while the sample size is large enough.

Methods
The sample size is a strong point of this study.

2.
A description of the characteristics of the patients group is lacking. It is not clear from the description how the measurement moments of this study were related to those of the acupuncture study; are these at baseline, during or after the treatment? Who were the interviewers?

3.
Regarding the equivalence interval for the GCPS: I consider .5 as too large as it is a ‘moderate difference’ in terms of the Cohen’s d classification.

Results
4.
Table 2 should be reformatted for reasons of readability. The outcome of the ANOVAs needs to be reported in more detail for the different steps and statistics (F and df, etc).

Discussion
5.
A number of important issues remain underexposed in the discussion. The large non-response can have an impact on the generalization possibilities. Further, the authors have to mention the (probable) much higher costs for the TI vs the SAQ mode of administration. As internet modes of administration are increasingly applied, they have to discuss these too. Limitations of their own research (pain patients with interest in acupuncture in a medical setting, short questionnaires) imply restrictions for extrapolation to groups of the general population, longer questionnaires etc., but this is ignored in their discussion part. Recommendations (when to apply which mode?) and solutions (what to do about the underestimation of mental problems in case of a telephonic interview) have to be added.

Abstract
6.
It is unclear what 3.5 score points less on the SF12 mental status scale mean: is this a large, moderate or small difference?

7.
Disadvantages of interview by telephone (more time-consuming and costly than SAQ) are not mentioned, which renders the conclusion rather biased.

Title
8.
The main title promises more than is actually given as this investigation concerns only two short instruments in a specific research field (qol and pain) and a specific population (chronic pain).

General

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
2,3,5,7

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
1,4,6,8
What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

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'