Reviewer's report

Title: Identifying strategies to maximise recruitment and retention of practices and patients in a multicentre randomised controlled trial of an intervention to optimise secondary prevention for coronary heart disease in primary care.

Version: 2 Date: 4 March 2009

Reviewer: Peter Murchie

Reviewer's report:

I would wish to start by saying that I believe the authors have done an important piece of work here. I have personally really struggled to write a similar paper in the past and, although their hearts may sink when they initially read my comments, I have definitely tried to be as positive as possible, and would encourage them to persist with what is an important piece of work.

Thank you for asking me to review this paper which reports on a "qualitative study embedded within an RCT." I feel that this paper is in need of major revision and restructuring before its publication can be considered. I enjoyed reading it, and believe that it contains important messages. I also appreciate that it will be a difficult paper to write. However, as currently configured I do not believe that it is an acceptable report of a qualitative research study.

MAJOR COMPULSORY REVISIONS

My main problem with the paper is that I disagree with several elements of its structure, that I do not believe it appropriately reports qualitative method or data, and does not draw supportable conclusions.

I will firstly give an overview of how I think the paper should be structured and then will offer some comments on the current manuscript.

I would suggest sections as follows.

1. Introduction
   The current introduction is appropriate and well written. However, a major omission is any mention of the MRC framework for the design and evaluation of complex healthcare interventions. The topic and approach that the authors report is so closely related to this major current topic, that I think they need to show how what they are doing is related, or different, to the MRC framework.

2. Detailed Description of Recruitment Process in RCT
   The paper needs a section comprising a detailed description of the recruitment process used in this study, and precisely how it was informed by their pilot work. The pilot work is currently only referenced. The necessary detail is there but is currently spread throughout the methods and results section of the paper as written.
3. Methods section
The paper needs a clear and precise description of how the qualitative data in
this parallel qualitative study was collected. At the moment there is a vague brief
account of this in the final section of the results on page 14. We need to know
how interviewees were chose, how qualitative data were collected, how much
data was collected, how is was analysed. I get no sense of this at all from the
paper as written currently.

The current methods section is an account of the RCTs recruitment strategy and
does not give any clear account of the qualitative methodology employed here.

4. RESULTS
Currently in the results and discussion section of the paper we are presented
with a reflective account of how the recruitment strategy worked. What we need
is a results section which tells us why, from the perspectives of researchers and
participants, each stage of the process (initial recruitment contact, practice visits,
patient contacts, consent, retention strategy) worked or did not, supported by
evidence of their actual experiences and thoughts (most helpfully in quotes).

5. Discussion
In my opinion the current discussion merely extends the reflective account of the
RCTs recruitment strategy. What I would want to see hear is i) a summary of the
information obtained from the qualitative interviews with researchers and
participants ii) an acknowledgement of the strengths and limitations of the study
iii) A brief discussion of what this adds to what is already known about RCT
recruitment and retention strategies iv) the wider implications of this qualitative
study.

CURRENT ABSTRACT
From my reading of this paper the methods (both in abstract and expanded in
detail in the paper should relate to the current final sentence namely "A
qualitative study embedded within an RCT to identify researchers' and
participants' perceptions of recruitment and ongoing contacts through thematic
analysis of transcripts of focus groups and interviews of purposively selected
individuals." We need full details of this in the methods section of the revised
paper, and appropriate quotes in the results section of the revised paper.

In the abstract results the authors state the recruitment rates of the RCT. In my
view these are NOT results of the qualitative study. Practical details of the
recruitment strategy along with this info will usefully be included in the revised
section 2 as suggested above.

CURRENT INTRODUCTION
Good as it goes, but needs some consideration of the MRC Framework.

METHODS
Currently (see above) there is precisely no detailed description of the qualitative
methods employed. The current section is all an account of the RCTs recruitment strategy. This needs to be considerably condensed and placed in another section.

The authors describe very different healthcare systems in the RoI and in NI. This is very important and presumably they will be able to present qualitative data on the challenges of this and how they were overcome. It also needs to be reflected upon in the discussion.

In the patient recruitment (p9) section the detail on patient inclusion criteria is superfluous for this work. We only need to know that they had CHD.

The first paragraph of the Retention Strategy seems like unnecessary detail. Unless of course it was suggested by the pilot work, which could all be outlined in revised section 2 as outlined above.

RESULTS
This section should contain the data gained from the qualitative interviews. Currently it, and the discussion, are a reflective account of the RCT recruitment process.

DISCUSSION
See above

CONCLUSIONS
The authors present no qualitative data whatsoever to support their conclusions. As the paper stands they are invalid.

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS
The response rates - both patient and practice are strikingly high. Is this typical for Ireland? It might be worth reflecting upon this in more detail in a discussion point.

Page 13 (last line) refers to a "dynamic document." This needs to be explained.

DISCRETIONARY REVISIONS
I thought some of the headings in the current results section were a bit misleading. For example "Participation rates and reason" referred to a paragraph that might more appropriately be headed "Initial practice recruitment." Similarly "Patient information" seemed to relate to more to "Initial patient recruitment." I also wondered if the second paragraph on page 13 (currently unlabelled) should be "Overall retention issues."

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