Author's response to reviews

Title: Comparing Recruitment Strategies in a Study of Acupuncture for Chronic Back Pain

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Version: 2 Date: 14 October 2009

Author's response to reviews: see over
October 14, 2009

Iratxe Puebla
Senior Editor
BMC Medical Research Methodology

Dear Dr. Puebla:

We are submitting our revised manuscript “Comparing Recruitment Strategies in a Study of Acupuncture for Chronic Back Pain” (Ms.1363155030303748). We note that the reviewers had no major revisions. Our response to the minor comments made by the reviewers follows:

1. Reviewer 1 wondered whether the health plan magazine might have reminded some possible participants receiving the letter to respond to the letter. In the manuscript, we note that only 13 persons who responded to the health plan advertisement received an invitation letter from us (Results, Response Rates by Recruitment Strategy, second sentence of first paragraph). Health plan advertisements were put in the quarterly newsletter on five occasions over the course of 18 months (October 2004 to April 2006), while letters were mailed between March 2004 and June 2006. While we cannot be certain that the advertisements did not remind some individuals who received mailings to respond to the mailing, the proportion of people who responded to mailings did not appear to be higher when they received their mailing closer to the time of an advertisement.

2. Reviewer 2 had 7 specific editing suggestions and we have now made all of these. In addition, we have made the following discretionary revisions: added the recruitment dates (March 2004 to August 2006) (Methods section, 4th sentence); added the number of advertisements in the health plans magazine (Methods, Recruitment by advertisement in the health plan); explained that we excluded persons from the Oakland site from this analysis (Methods section, last sentence) because about 90% of them were recruited using mailed letters – which addresses the question about recruitment methods at the second site; replaced the term “unselected patients” with “routine patients” when describing the findings of reference 8 (Discussion, paragraph 2). We thought the other discretionary revisions would actually detract from the focus of the article.

3. Reviewer 4 had two minor revisions. We have now revised second sentence of the second paragraph of the introduction to say: In this report, we compare the effects of two different recruitment strategies in terms of their efficiency, the characteristics of the
patients who respond, and their responses to treatment. In response to a request for more information about the health plan magazine, we have now added that we put five advertisements in the health plan magazine at three to six month intervals over a period of 18 months (Methods, Recruitment by advertisement in the health plan). Finally, the reviewer requested more information on how different recruitment strategies could lead to different conclusions about treatment efficacy. We have added a sentence in the first paragraph of the Introduction (6th sentence) that gives an example of this by stating: Conceivably, persons recruited via advertisements might be more enthusiastic about complementary and alternative medicine and thus, studies using such volunteers might demonstrate greater benefits.” This further elaborates on our statement that different populations might have vastly different pre-conceived notions about complementary medicine and those could affect estimates of treatment effects.

4. Reviewer 5 had only discretionary revisions. She was confused about one of our limitations as described in the following sentence: “However, because we could not distinguish between acute and chronic back pain using diagnoses included in electronic medical records, we cannot estimate how representative the responders to mailed invitations were to the group of persons who sought care for chronic back pain.” We must point out that we did, in fact, fact screen responders to our letters (and to the magazine ad) to make sure that they met the inclusion criteria for chronic back pain. However, we think it conceivable that a non-representative subset of the persons with chronic back pain would have responded to our letter. We have tried to clarify this potential confusion by the addition of the bolded italicized text: However, because we could not distinguish between acute and chronic back pain using diagnoses included in electronic medical records, we cannot estimate how representative the responders to mailed invitations were to the group of persons who sought care for chronic back pain, for example by comparison to medical records of persons with chronic back pain. We hope that this phrase makes our meaning clearer.

We have now added a new second sentence in the Methods section that states that the study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards for both sites where the trial was conducted.

Thank you for the opportunity to make these revisions. Please address any correspondence to me. For your convenience, my contact information is given below.

Sincerely,

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