Reviewers report

Title: Pain, power and patience - a narrative study of general practitioners’ relation to chronic pain patients

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Reviewer: cecilia Björkelund

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Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

This is a paper aiming to understand and illustrate what physicians experience in contact with chronic pain patients. A narrative method is used in the analysis of interviews from three GPs. The paper is interesting and rather well written, but I have the following comments. Before the authors have responded to these, I can not reach a decision on publication recommendation.

1. The selection is claimed to be strategic, i.e. the informants were chosen to represent different ages, sexes, workplaces, length of experience etc. In a two-wave selection process only three informants remain. The authors should explain the selection process more deeply, especially “The narratives of two doctors escaped the narrative analytic tools and were excluded from the final presentation”.

2. Dr A was interviewed in 2005 as a pilot study, but still this narrative belongs to the presented results. Was there a discussion around including the pilot interview in the results? If not – why?

3. It should be mentioned in Discussion why the narrative method was chosen instead of e.g. a phenomenological method.

4. First sentence of Results: We found that each narrative illustrated a particular dilemma and a strategy to deal with chronic pain patients. Which narratives are included in “each” – specify!

5. The sentence: “Listening, encouraging and teamwork are central professional tools to handle these difficult situations.” If this is a part of the study’s findings I think the authors should state this more clearly – f.ex: Listening, encouraging and teamwork are the informants’ professional tools to handle these difficult situations.” As it stands now, it more seems to be a statement based on earlier research, (and then should be supported by reference(s)).
6. "Even their strategies overlap" (Discussion, Strengths and limitations, line 11) – but in Results different strategies are presented: Doctor A: power game, prepare, to stay calm and to listen attentively
Dr B: build a stable relationship and change the patient’s life
Dr C: keeping some distance and seeking support from other professionals within health care.

There are not very much overlaps in the presented narratives – and I get a feeling that here the authors present results that emanate from the initial, wider, group of interviews, not all presented in Results.

7. In Discussion it is also stressed that the narratives presented and analyzed all were close time and “fresh”, making them well suited for narrative analysis. The authors in this way uses “freshness” as a tool for selection. This should be mentioned either in Methods or Results.

8. Dr C and Dr D are said to be excluded (last paragraph, Strengths and limitations) and I get confused – was it not Dr D and DR E that were excluded? What happened to Dr E?

9. The aim of this study according to Abstract “to understand and illustrate what physicians experience in contact with chronic pain patients and what may work and what may not work in these consultations”, but in the paper the aim is described as “to understand and illustrate what may work and what may not work in physicians’ contacts with chronic pain patients”. I think there is a higher congruence between the Abstact formulated aim and the reported results and Conclusion, and the authors should secure that the aim is one and the same.

10. From the aim formulated in the paper, “to understand and illustrate what may work and what may not work in physicians’ contacts with chronic pain patients” the authors chose the question
"Can you tell me about a patient with chronic pain, or a consultation with such a patient, that has evoked strong reactions from you?"
If the aim was to understand both what may work –and not– the focus of the study is strongly on what may not work, both in the wording of the initially asked question and the analysis. I don’t think the second sentence in Conclusion: “Consultation skills are an important tool in these situations and training is essential” really answers the research question, merely illustrates the comprehension of the authors, and should be rephrased, so that it is clear what is the result of the study and what could be the consequence from this result.

11. The abstract contains 333 words. I don’t know the authors’ instructions for the BMC Family Practice, but this seems a bit too long.

12. What is a “difficult patient”?

13. The title: a narrative study of general practitioners’ relation to chronic pain patients - would it be more accurate to use relate to instead of relation? Maybe
the authors have chosen the accurate formulation, but it would be interesting to hear the motivation of the choice "relation".

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

14.....aiming at having greater influence.....

.........cannot cure of (?).........

....training of consultation SKILLS? for medical....

Should it be O or Oh in the citations?

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined? Acceptable
2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? Yes
3. Are the data sound? Yes
4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? Yes
5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? Could be improved
6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? Yes
7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? Yes
8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? There is incongruence between abstract and paper
9. Is the writing acceptable? Yes, with minor revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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'