Reviewer’s report

Title: Unbearable suffering in terminally ill cancer patients dying at home: a cross-sectional analysis of intensity and unbearability

Version: 1 Date: 23 June 2013

Reviewer: Nils Schneider

Reviewer’s report:

This is an interesting manuscript with a relevant topic. There is still a lack of research on end of life issues in primary care. The authors carried out personal interviews with 76 cancer patients recruited in General Practices in the Netherlands to assess intensity and unbearability of physical and psychosocial symptoms using an instrument which has been developed and used in previous studies. The findings suggest that understanding patients’ suffering at the end of life requires assessment of intensity as well as unbearability since the relationship between the characteristics is variable. The authors conclude that GPs should be trained in diagnostics of suffering.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The study’s background is described very scantily. While the development of euthanasia and physician assisted suicide in the Netherlands are worked out, there are no figures and characterization with regard to the development of palliative care. The authors should also consider studies on quality of life in palliative cancer patients.

2. Which tool was used to identify patients with a life expectancy of six months or less?

3. Although 64 patients (out of 76 patients recruited) could be followed up until death with interviews every 2 months, only a cross-sectional analysis based on the final data was performed. Please explain why there is no longitudinal analysis along the illness trajectory or at specific points of time.

4. Please describe the analytic process for the qualitative answers and the selection of the quotes in Table 3.

5. I agree that descriptive presentation of the data is appropriate. However, the results should also be presented for sex, age groups and cancer diagnosis to enhance the significance (Tables).

6. Data collection took place between 2003-2007. The authors should address the time delay until publishing in the discussion and reflect upon possible chances in the meantime (e.g. development of palliative care services and training?)

Minor Essential Revisions

7. Discussion: While I agree with the authors that GPs should be trained in
understanding the multiple dimensions of suffering as part of education in palliative care, I miss specific suggestions how to realize this.

**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