Reviewer's report

Title: General practitioners knowledge and practice of complementary/alternative medicine and its relationship with life-styles: a population-based survey in Italy

Version: 1 Date: 18 October 2006

Reviewer: Marie Pirotta

Reviewer's report:

General
This research project aimed to explore Tuscan GPs’ attitudes and use of complementary therapies and the relationship of this to their own lifestyles. An appropriate method was used (cross sectional survey) and the aims have been fairly well achieved.

Many similar surveys have been undertaken in developed countries. However, this is the first report of such a survey in Italy, that I am aware of. This group has expanded on the typical approach to this research by adding questions about the GPs own dietary and physical exercise practice, and also the types of conditions for which CAM is used, which add novel aspects to the study.

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

Could the authors provide some additional information about how the random sample of 60% of the male GPs was selected?

Was the study submitted for approval to an ethics committee?

Would it be possible to compare survey responders with non-responders? Or with national figures on Italian GPs to show the readers how representative the sample is?

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

On what basis were the 11 types of CAM chosen to be included in the survey – local popularity? Funded by health insurance? From the focus group discussion?

Several of these CAM are unknown to me, so I suspect many readers also. Please include a brief explanation of mesotherapy and pranotherapy and phytotherapy (is this herbs?).

The survey follow up was well done. It would be good to provide a flow chart for readers of how this proceeded. How many surveys were completed by telephone? How many interviewers undertook this task? Could this method introduce a bias between the postal self-completed surveys and the telephone surveys?

The information about response rates etc (which were excellent!) belongs in the results section.

The age distribution is said to be ‘homogenous’. From the figures provided, it seems to be mainly middle-aged – again, how representative is this responding sample?

The data appear sound. However, most of the text in the results section is merely restating what is in the tables and is therefore redundant.

Language issues:

Background:
missing "many of" in second line.
Results: in Predictors of patterns etc practise rather than practice in line 6.
Discussion:
findings rather than finding in second last line of middle paragraph.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

In several places in the manuscript, the authors emphasise the lack of evidence for most of CAM and the lack of rigorous evaluation (page 3, second paragraph). The two references quoted here are quite old. Although I agree that these statements still hold true in general, there is actually a great deal of rigorous research in CAM: for example, the Cochrane database in this area is rapidly expanding (200 reviews when checked today). Perhaps a slightly more optimistic tone could be employed here. (http://www.cochrane.org/cochrane/revabstr/mainindex.htm).

The expression ‘north-south’ gradient should be explained. This information about CAM use by the general population in Italy (more at the top of page 10 also) is very interesting and may be better placed in the background to give readers a more complete context for the study.

The association between GPs’ lifestyles and CAM use is interesting. Other studies have examined GPs’ own personal use of CAM, for example: Cohen, M., S. Penman, et al. (2005). "The Integration of Complementary Therapies in Australian General Practice: Results of a National Survey." Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine 11(6): 995-1004.

In the second paragraph on page 11, it is stated that the proportion never recommending CAM is a ‘serious concern’. I am not sure if the authors here are referring to the GPs not referring for CAM or something else? Once again here, perhaps reference to the growing evidence-base could be made.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
‘I declare that I have no competing interests’