Reviewer's report

Title: Feasibility and cost-effectiveness of internet-based exposure treatment for irritable bowel syndrome in a clinical sample: a randomized controlled trial

Version: 3 Date: 17 July 2011

Reviewer: Yanda van Rood

Reviewer's report:

The authors have rewritten the manuscript completely and they have answered the points sufficiently well. However, as the authors state in their final sentence in reply to the reviewers “…major rewriting … always raises new questions …” Indeed some major compulsory revisions (MCR) and minor but essential revisions (MER) still need to be addressed.

MCR

Firstly, the authors are advised to let their manuscript be corrected for English style and specifically pay attention to the phrasing of sentences and use of commas. The authors use the personal style (‘we’ / ‘our’) often (39 /29 times) also in parts of the manuscript were a impersonal (academic) style is expected (methods, analysis and results).

Furthermore, the background and discussion are very long and they both need structuring; i.e. a paragraph per subject and subjects logically following from each other. This would improve reading and lead to a reduction of the number of words since at a number of occasions the authors repeat themselves.

MER: The title includes feasibility and cost-effectiveness but effectiveness is missing from it.

MCR: In the method section the authors describe how they study effectiveness and cost-effectiveness but feasibility is not defined. Instead of feasibility the authors might want to focus on acceptability instead since acceptability and compliance seem more relevant aspects of the study than feasibility.

Acceptability and compliance to the treatment regime were low as is suggested by the high dropout rates (also before randomization) and the fact that only 43% of the patients worked through all the steps of the program.

MER: In the method section, e.g. treatment condition, background information is given that might be better placed in the background section.

MER: In the analysis section the authors describe that they used all available data on the assumption of MAR; i.e. missing at random. However, one might question the randomness of the missing data especially since the data itself give the impression that the missing of data might be associated with lower acceptability and/or compliance to treatment of patients with more severe IBS complaints. The authors might want to describe how this assumption was tested.
or made plausible.

DR: Results. The intervention is aimed at breaking the vicious circle by reducing anxiety and avoidance behaviour. Pearson correlations between the change scores of IBS symptoms and anxiety and avoidance measures, would give some insight in the relation between these two aspects and mechanisms that play a role in the reduction of IBS symptoms (mediators).

<ER: Page 9 first sentences Figure 1 needs to be Table 1. Please check, on 11 occasions Figure is used, were in some instances Table is meant.

DR: In the discussion the authors should present firstly the results concerning feasibility (or better acceptability), effectiveness and cost-effectiveness before discussing them. Furthermore, in the discussion the authors might want to refer to other studies as well as to their own previous study. Specifically studies showing that certain interventions are most suited for patients with less severe symptoms.

DR: The results suggest that this specific ICBT intervention is best suited for patients with less severe IBS complaints, anxiety and avoidance behaviour. In the discussion the authors might want to bring forward that the intervention could be a offered as a first step in a stepped care approach and could best be offered to patients in primary practice who have generally less severe complaints than patients visiting an outpatient GE clinic. These patients are probably also more like the self referred and specialist referred patients from the earlier study.

DR: The effect-size observed in the earlier study was large, the effect-size in the current study was moderate. “Somewhat larger” does not accurately describes the difference.

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests’