Reviewer's report

Title: Evaluation of the Birmingham IBS Symptom Questionnaire.

Version: 1 Date: 31 March 2008

Reviewer: Pali Hungin

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This is a timely paper in an important area. IBS is a relatively common problem but we have few means of assessing patients' symptoms even though specific diagnostic criteria have been laid out in successive Rome consensus reports. This research, relying on a postal questionnaire to IBS sufferers, describes the characteristics of a Likert-based symptom questionnaire. It is cross evaluated against a QoL questionnaire.

The approach used is very reasonable and the results as described indicate the instrument to be reliable.

However, is is likely to be effective in the clinical setting? A few important points arise: the subjects consisted of both those with Rome II confirmed IBS and those with a previous diagnosis (and thus presumably no Rome II confirmation). I am not sure if the same results might have been obtained from each of these groups. Including those with a clinical diagnosis is a pragmatic approach but the chief symptoms evaluated are very much Rome II orientated.

Also, whereas some of the questions were relatively descriptive (eg "loose, mushy or water bowel motions") others rely entirely on the subject's own interpretation (eg "diarrhoea" or "constipation"). There has to be a question mark about the clinical reliability of responses to such questions - a case in point is the differentiation in two different questions between hard bowel motion and constipation - in practice many patients would regard the former as constipation whereas most clinicians would relate constipation with infrequent stool. Previous research has shown disconnect between patients' own interpretations and a Rome based evaluation.

The paper would be strengthened by including interviews, or, by an explanation of how the difficulties above are overcome in commending this questionnaire. The risk is that the instrument itself may have scored very well (it has!) but that it does not describe accurately what the patient's problems actually are in the real life situation. Also, other factors such as bloating or tiredness did not appear in the symptom evaluation questionnaire even though they are regarded as part if IBS. Does this matter here?

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable
**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.