Reviewer's report

Title: Self reported health status, and health service contact, of illicit drug users aged 50 and over: a qualitative interview study in the United Kingdom

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Reviewer: Russel Falck

Reviewer's report:

The manuscript addresses an interesting as well as an important topic – aging drug users, their health status, and their perceptions about their contacts with health serve providers. It is a clearly written paper. It could be improved by addressing several issues.

1) The title of the manuscript leads one to believe that the study focuses on older drug users in the UK. The study is actually based on a very small (n=10) and biased sample from Merseyside/Liverpool. The title promises more than the manuscript delivers. The authors should consider re-titling the article to more accurately reflect what it covers.

2) Although the authors correctly note the lack of generalizibility of qualitative studies, this does not excuse the limitations of a biased sample, or at least discussing why it is biased. It appears that the sample was recruited solely from drug abuse treatment agencies in Merseyside/Liverpool. This should be so stated if this is the case. More detail on the actual recruitment process would be helpful. Importantly, the manuscript does not address older users who have not been in treatment.

3) Similar to the above points, it is not possible from reading the manuscript to ascertain what kind of users the manuscript is actually describing. It seems likely many, if not all of them, were injectors. It is not clear whether they used heroin, cocaine HCl, crack, or what, or whether or not they are still using. Whatever the case, it is clear, for one example, that people who only smoke marijuana and drink alcohol, and who are aged 50 and above, are older drug users (as defined by the authors), but such people are not addressed in this study, regardless of whether or not they have been in treatment.

4) With nine men and one woman in the sample, it is hard to accept that thematic saturation was reached on an issue like health status, particularly given the different health issues that confront men and women as they age.

5) The discussion of physical health section of the manuscript details issues related to HCV. Why just HCV and not other blood-borne infections? The discussion seems to be based very much on the extant literature and not so much on the actual findings of the study itself. The discussion about respiratory problems is neglectful of the possible role of cigarette smoking in the development of such problems. The inclusion of tricyclics as a cause of memory
impairment among drug users is odd given there is no mention in the manuscript of the sample having used such drugs. The authors might want to reconsider referring to them in the context in which they do. Also, I think the term is “over” not “other” the counter medicines.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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