Author's response to reviews

Title: Factors Associated with Cancer-related Fatigue in Breast Cancer Patients during Endocrine Treatment in an Urban Setting

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Version: 6 Date: 28 April 2010

Author's response to reviews: see over
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Version: 2 Date: 28 April 2010

Author’s response to reviews: see over
Reviewer's report

Title: Factors associated with cancer-related fatigue among breast cancer during endocrine treatment in an urban area

Version: 2 Date: 10 March 2010

Reviewer: Kristine A Donovan

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The authors draw very broad conclusions from the questions they apparently asked of the breast cancer patients. They need to acknowledge the retrospective nature of the self-report data and the fact that the likelihood of recall bias is very high.
   
   We have clarified this in the limitations below the discussion.

2. Only one item is used to quantify fatigue and it is not clear how participants were asked to respond to the question. Is this question assessing fatigue at the moment that the participant is completing the questionnaire? This needs to be clarified.
   
   We have now included these contents in the third paragraph of the methods.

3. Please provide the empirical basis for classifying the fatigue levels as mild, moderate, and fatigue. What data support how these categories are defined?
   
   We have clarified these contents in the third paragraph of the methods.

4. It appears that the researchers asked respondents to indicate whether their fatigue had changed since beginning endocrine therapy, though this is not particularly clear. For some women the start of endocrine therapy was five years previously. Thus, recall bias is very likely here. This should at least be acknowledged.
   
   We have clarified this in the limitations below the discussion.

5. In the Abstract the authors state that little is known about cancer-related fatigue in women with breast cancer. This is not true; most of the research to date has been done with breast cancer patients.
   
   The reviewer is correct, we have deleted this sentence.

6. The Abstract is too long; too much detail is provided in the Methods section
about how physical activity and diet were characterized. Not enough detail is provided about the participants' demographic and clinical characteristics.

The abstract has been changed as the reviewer indicates.

7. Background. Much of the information provided in this section is not cited; more references need to be provided. For example, the brief discussion regarding the idea that fatigue is mediated by the endocrine sequel (is this supposed to be sequelae?) of breast cancer treatment has no references associated with it, but certainly should.

Change made as indicated by the reviewer.

8. Methods. Please provide data on how long ago these participants were diagnosed with breast cancer. How long ago had they completed treatment, on average? Was time since diagnosis or time since treatment completion associated with fatigue? This should be explored.

We have clarified these contents in the first paragraph of the methods.

9. Questionnaires. The first sentence in this section states “Every patient was screened for fatigue at regular intervals.” What does this mean exactly? This was apparently a cross-sectional study so how does this sentence fit with the cross-sectional nature of the study? Did the participants fill out the questionnaire once and only once?

We have deleted this sentence because it dose not depict the correct meaning. The following statements now appear in the third paragraph of the methods of the paper:

The respondents indicated whether their fatigue had changed during endocrine therapy and assessed fatigue at the moment that the participant was completing the questionnaire.

10. Questionnaires. The last sentence in this sentence states that “The improvement or aggravation was determined by the scales.” What does this mean? Does this mean that the participants indicated whether their fatigue had improved or gotten worse by responding to particular questions about this or was fatigue assessed at different timepoints and these data analyzed to indicate whether fatigue had improved or not?

We have clarified these contents in the third paragraph of the methods.

11. Physical activity levels. The description of physical activity levels provided in the text is not consistent with the questionnaire. This needs to be clarified.

We have clarified these contents in the fourth paragraph of the methods.

Types of physical activity were self-reported by participants. The levels of physical activities were evaluated according to the “Physical
Activities Investigation Form” provided by Institute for Nutrition and Food Safety of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Intensity, duration, and frequency of physical activity were documented and converted into metabolic equivalents (METs).

12. Dietary assessments. This section states that multiple dietary logs were completed. How is this the case if the study is cross-sectional. Also, are the dietary questions on the questionnaire supposed to represent a dietary log? If not, please provide the log so that the reviewers can assess its use.

   We have deleted this sentence because it dose not depict the correct meaning. We have clarified this in the fifth paragraph of the methods.

13. Results. Much is made in the Discussion about premature menopause and its effects. However, no data are provided to indicate how many of the participants actually experienced premature menopause. These data should be provided as it is has direct bearing on how the results are interpreted and the conclusions drawn.

   The following statements now appear in the first paragraph of the results of the paper:
   The incidence of amenorrhea at 12 months, premature menopause, was 27.6%.

14. Results. Second paragraph. The authors state that 189 patients had improved fatigue or fatigue in “complete remission.” They also state that 16 patients had constant or worsened fatigue. How were these numbers derived? What questions from the questionnaire were used to assess this? See Comment 1 about how biased these results may be if the participant was simply asked to indicate whether their fatigue had improved or gotten worse; there are no quantitative data available to support this it would seem.

   Part V in the questionnaire:

   【3】During endocrine therapy, fatigue score was (Please write the score)

   ① Reduce ② Increase

16. Discussion. This section is too long and can be shortened without detriment to the article.

   Change made as indicated by the reviewer.

17. Discussion. The discussion about physical activity provides data that is better suited to the Results section and should be included there, not in the Discussion.
18. In general, the authors overstate what they found in this cross-sectional, correlational study. The questions that ask participants about changes to fatigue levels are subject to considerable recall bias making the data derived from these of questionable validity. This at least needs to be addressed as a limitation of the study.

   We have clarified this in the limitations below the discussion.

19. The manuscript would benefit from better organization and a reduction in the length of the Discussion section. There is a lack of clarity in the results and the interpretation of these results, and the writing and use of the English language is not good. An editor or colleague more familiar with written English should be recruited to improve the grammar and sentence structure of the manuscript.

   We have revised the manuscript, change made as indicated by the reviewer.
Reviewer's report

Title: Factors associated with cancer-related fatigue in breast cancer during endocrine treatment in an urban area

Version: 2 Date: 7 April 2010

Reviewer: Christopher G Lis

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. In relation to the title of the manuscript, I would suggest that it be re-worded to something similar to the following: “Factors associated with cancer-related Fatigue in breast cancer patients undergoing endocrine treatment in an urban setting”
   
   The title of the article has been changed partly as the reviewer indicates.
   
   Title: Factors associated with cancer-related fatigue in breast cancer patients during endocrine treatment in an urban setting

2. I would suggest a separate table describing the results of logistic regression in these patients. The table should describe the Odds Ratios, 95% CIs and corresponding p values for all variables that were investigated in relation to CRF.
   
   we have added table 2 to the Results.

3. Please describe the inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study?
   
   We have clarified these contents in the first paragraph of the methods.

4. How was the sample size of 315 reached? How many eligible patients were seen during the indicated time interval? How many were approached to participate? And how many were finally recruited? What was the response rate? It’s difficult to ascertain whether the sample is a convenience sample, a random sample or a case series.
   
   We have clarified these contents in the second paragraph of the methods.

5. What are the limitations of this study? This needs to be addressed in the discussion section. For example, some of the limitations of the study might
include that it was a retrospective study design and/or a convenience study sample etc.

We have clarified this in the limitations below the discussion.