Reviewer's report

**Title:** Acceptability of the Distress Thermometer and Problem List to community-based telephone cancer helpline operators, and cancer patients and carers.

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 18 March 2010

**Reviewer:** Alex Mitchell

**Reviewer's report:**

This is a study looking at acceptability of the DT and associated problem list. This is a welcome area of research, not well described in previous work. The sample was 18 “operators” assessing 666 callers with cancer or carers. Of these 7 operators were asked to respond to a brief custom made self-administered questionnaire. Although no example is given questions (outcome domains) were addressed 1. benefits and challenges of utilising the DT and PL 2 “ease of” administration over the telephone, 3. usefulness in triaging, and 4 frequency of use.

Unfortunately the results of this version of the manuscript are difficult to interpret. For example, how many patients and how many carers were there? This is not clear in the text or in table 1. Results should be broken down by each group. Secondly the outcomes domains are not discussed logically. Again results should be broken down 1-4 as above. To give an example, on page 8 the authors state “Five broad themes emerged for operators not utilising the DT and PL” This percentage is unclear. Is this 72 operator-patient interactions where no DT/PL was applied? The authors must clarify the denominator. Table 1 lists PL endorsements, but this is not the focus of this paper. Table 1 should list the feedback from operators and ideally patients and caregivers (separately) on the acceptability of the DT. Table 2 presents a narrative list of benefits and challenges in DT screening. This is valuable but even more valuable would be a systematic quantitative description using the main outcome domains. In conclusion this is a potentially valuable paper but it currently uncomfortably straddles a qualitative and quantitative approach to investigate acceptability. More work is required to present the quantitative data logically to aid reader interpretation.

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

**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