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: 19 April 2010

Reviewer: Joe Low

Reviewer's report:

The main aim of this study is to investigate the acceptability of the Distress Thermometer (DT) and its associated Problem List (PL). Overall, the paper reads well and is generally well-structured, though there are some points, particularly in the results sections which need some clarification and a bit more work.

Background:

Can the authors clarify the background of the operators that use the DT? Do health professionals refer to qualified nurses, non-qualified nurses, doctors, professionals allied to medicine 9 (p5)?

Methodology:

‘Callers’ p6.

• How many callers were contacted? Does 666 represent the number of callers who phoned during the recruitment period and fitted the eligibility criteria. In that case, how many callers did not fit the eligibility criteria?
• The ‘n=’ is not needed and should be removed, it should read ‘666 callers…’
• How did operators expand on the issue of practical problem as a source of stress (p6, l.17) if there were not housing, finances, work, transport or child care.

Results

• It is not clear from the ‘callers’ section how many of the callers were patients and how many were carers. Can the authors state how many were in each group? It would make sense of the data presented later.
• Can the authors check their figures as they do not seem to add up? If 666 callers were recruited, 594 given the DT and 68 not given the DT, what happened to 4 missing callers?
• Could the section on ‘use of the DT and PL by operators’ be sub-headed? It seems that paragraph 2 and 3 deal with reasons for not utilising the DT and PL, paragraph 4 on why patients did not respond to the DT.
• Would it be clearer if the authors presented the data presented in paragraph 2 and 3 in a table, with data from patients and carers presented side by side in descending order and to highlight the main findings in the text?
Discussion

• From my understanding of the PL, as this is not a validated measure, items can be added without to it without problem.

• Another limitation of the study is that no key demographic detail (age, gender, educational level) are presented, so difficult to compare this sample with samples from other studies.

• The fact that the values obtained for cut-off values from DT validation studies have obtained for the self-administrated form also mean that the authors need to express caution when using these cut-offs for their telephone administered version.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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.