Reviewer's report

Title: A Systematic Review of Symptom Assessment Scales in Children with Cancer

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Reviewer: Kristina Hardy

Reviewer's report:

The authors conducted a systematic search for published articles that pertained to assessment of symptoms in pediatric cancer patients. This issue is a relevant one that may be of interest to readers of BMC Cancer. The paper is succinctly and clearly written and the authors’ search methods appear to be logical, reliable, and thorough.

Major Compulsory Revisions:

1. A main issue for the authors to consider is to include more specific information about the symptom assessment measures used in pediatric cancer research. Despite the authors’ stated intention to review or describe the existing symptom assessment tools, very little detail is presented on the actual measures that were identified in the literature search. Providing additional information about the measures (see below) would strengthen the utility of the paper to clinical practice and also aid investigators in selected or adapting existing measures for specific research aims related to the screening physical health symptoms in pediatric cancer patients. Specifically, it would be helpful for the measures themselves to be listed and briefly described (e.g., How many items? Scope of symptoms? Who reports? What scale is used? Age range of patients assessed? How often cited in the literature?). It would also be potentially useful to know how many of these measures included questions pertaining to the nine symptoms that have been included in the ESAS. This could appear in a table to provide readers with a clear and accessible means to review the measures.

Discretionary Revisions:

1. The title as written gives the impression, at least to this reader, that the individual symptom measures were to be reviewed or evaluated in some detail. The authors may consider changing the title to reflect what the paper presents: the identification and use of symptom assessment tools used in the pediatric cancer literature. Alternately, the inclusion of more detailed information about each measure would render the existing title an appropriate one.

2. In the Abstract, it would be helpful to briefly clarify that the authors are referring to a review of assessments of primarily physical health symptoms. The first two sentences of the Abstract “Conclusions” are redundant with information in the results; rephrasing these sentences, merging the Results and
Conclusions sections, or adding additional detail to the Conclusion would clarify this section.

3. In the Introduction, it would also be beneficial for the authors to briefly clarify the type and scope of symptoms they included in their search for symptom assessment tools. In their exclusion criteria, the authors note that assessments measuring only psychological symptoms were not included, by which it can be inferred that measures of primarily physical health symptoms were being considered. Although this may already be assumed by most readers, it would help to define the scope of the targeted review more precisely at the outset.

4. Early in their Discussion, the authors may perhaps more accurately conclude that their review of available data indicated that symptom assessments are not used for symptom screening, or that there is a lack of information about the utility of these measures for symptom screening purposes. From the evidence provided, it seems difficult to conclude that the existing measures reflect an absence of screening measures; rather, there is not sufficient evidence from which to characterize the reliability and validity of their use towards that aim. Indeed, the authors note that a logical next step is to carefully evaluate these identified measures for that purpose. As such, it would be of interest for the authors to list or discuss possible essential features that would be necessary in an ideal screening instrument (aside from merely that it be brief). What scope of symptoms should be included? Would it be critical that a child-report version be available? What age range should be evaluated? Etc.).

**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 to disclose.