Author's response to reviews

Title: Differences in the symptom experience of older versus younger oncology outpatients: a cross-sectional study

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RESPONSE TO REVIEWERS' COMMENTS

MS: 8105022047431189 - Differences in the symptom experience of older versus younger oncology outpatients: a cross-sectional study Janine K Cataldo, Steven Paul, Bruce Cooper, Helen Skerman, Kimberly Alexander, Bradley Aouizerat, Virginia Blackman, John Merriman, Laura Dunn, Christine Ritchie, Patsy Yates and Christine Miaskowski

We would like to thank the editor and reviewers for their thoughtful comments on our revised manuscript. Our response to each of the comments is below the comment in italics.

Editorial comment

1. Peer review of your manuscript is now complete and, in the light of the reports, I am sorry to say that we cannot consider the manuscript for publication in BMC Medicine. On a positive note, however, we do feel that your manuscript could be suitable for publication in our subject-specific journal, BMC Cancer if you are able to respond adequately to the reviewers' comments.

Response – We would be pleased to have this paper published in BMC Cancer. Based on your comments, we would like to confirm that the paper would not need to be re-reviewed prior to publication in BMC Cancer.

2. There is one editorial change that should be made; it seems there is a mistake in the Authors' contributions and VG should be VB.

Response – This typographical error was corrected in the revised manuscript.

Reviewer #1 - Gary Rodin

1. A summation of the findings regarding previous research on age-related differences in cancer should included in order to understand the unique contribution of this paper. Examples of previous studies of age-related differences in symptoms in cancer patients - which the authors have requested- include Mohile SG et al, 2011; Cheung WY et al, 2011; Kroenke CH et al JCO 2004.

Response – We would like to thank the reviewer for these additional references. Please note that the Cheung reference was part of the original submission. However, based on the reviewer's suggested references, several additional references were found to enhance the manuscript. Information from these references was added to the revised manuscript.

Reviewer #2 - Lucia Gagliese

1. My comment at this point concerns the interpretation of the results. Overall, I think the Discussion and Abstract overplay the age differences in symptom severity and frequency. To my reading, the results suggest that older people may be less likely to report certain symptoms (about half of those measured by the MSAS) but when they do experience the symptom, its severity and frequency are likely not to be different than that reported by younger people (severity is lower for only 19% of symptoms and frequency for only 13% of symptoms). As such, the authors should consider why response shift and reporting barriers would operate on only symptoms' occurrence and distress but not, for the most part, on their severity or frequency and why, despite the potential impact of these response "biases" the same symptoms are reported most frequently in each age group.

Response – We would like to thank the reviewer for her thoughtful comments on the Discussion section of the paper. A potential explanation for why a response shift is evident for occurrence but not for severity, frequency and distress was added to the discussion section of the revised manuscript.