Reviewer's report

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

Version: 3 Date: 26 October 2012

Reviewer: Lucia Gagliese

Reviewer's report:

I thank the authors' for their careful attention to my previous comments. They have addressed my suggestions in a thoughtful manner. The revised manuscript is stronger and provides interesting hypothesis-generating preliminary results. It will be interesting for future studies to explore the mechanisms behind the age-related patterns and their potential clinical impact.

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.