Reviewer's report

Title: Europe is heterogeneous. The influence of transnational care policy differences on baseline characteristics of adolescents with cannabis disorder in the INCANT trial

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Reviewer: Dagmar Hedrich

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The paper addresses methodological challenges of multi-site trials, in particular differences in clinical and demographic characteristics across sites. It explores the role of referral source to explain the observed substantial differences in baseline characteristics between adolescents at the different INCANT sites.

Self-determined or coerced participation in treatment is an important variable, the question is well-defined and the analysis conducted by the authors is a relevant step to understand cross-site differences. Two recommendations for improvement of the paper are made:

1. The authors use data on the original five 'sources of referral' (Table 4) to create two new categories: self-determined and externally coerced. For creating this dichotomous variable, referrals from 'professionals' and from 'school' hav not automatically been allocated to one category, but needed to be re-classified. In this process, it remains somewhat unclear how the final allocation was reached, and where and when any necessary additional information was collected.

For example: while in the vast majority of cases in DE and NL the referral source is 'professionals', these two countries end up in the final classification of 'Referral by degree of coercion, site and treatment condition' (Table 5) with very different ratios. Some explanation is given in the text, but it appears incomplete. Or, while higher rate of original referrals in BE than in NL were 'justice-led' (23% vs. 19%), BE shows a final classification with higher rates of self-determined referrals.

It is therefore recommended that the authors clarify the definitions they used and that they describe the process of re-classification in the new groups in more detail.

2. The title of the paper suggests that referral sources in INCANT would be representative for general referral policies in the participating countries, implicitly characterising countries' care-policy as leading to justice-led or self-determined (cannabis) treatment. Pathways through which clients entered the INCANT trial did seem quite different between countries, but it remains unclear how representative the findings here are for pathways into (Cannabis) treatment in the country as a whole.

In this context, the recruitment of Swiss participants should be better described to
illustrate if/how 72% of justice referrals are representative for Swiss treatment culture. The rate of 20% of German participants in sheltered housing (leading automatically to a classification as 'externally coerced' into treatment) does not strike as representative for German youth with cannabis-related treatment need.

It is therefore recommended that the discussion should be made more balanced by adding a critical discussion of the specificity of the INCANT recruitment process.

**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.