Reviewer's report

**Title:** Barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking for young elite athletes. A qualitative study

**Version:** 2  **Date:** 7 April 2012

**Reviewer:** Debra Rickwood

**Reviewer's report:**

Overall, this paper addresses an interesting application within the help-seeking literature – namely the barriers and facilitators to young elite athletes seeking mental health care. As pointed out by the authors, this population group has not been well investigated and is a relevant sub-group in its own right and comprises an interesting point of comparison for the mainstream help-seeking literature.

- **Major Compulsory Revisions**

1. The main revision required in this paper is the application of an appropriate qualitative methodology. At present, there is nothing described relating to the qualitative methodology except, “Thematic analysis [53] was used to classify participant statements on reported barriers and facilitators into themes”. This is inadequate, and an appropriate qualitative methodology needs to be applied and fully described. For example, was a program like NVivo used to aid categorisation or was this done by hand? How were themes determined? Who undertook the coding and what reliability checks were put in place (ie, another researcher coding a proportion of the material, Kappa coefficient computed); How was the salience of themes determined – were they general, variant etc? At present, there is no qualitative methodology applied or described. This leads to the issue described in the next point.

2. The results are largely presented as a narrative and no methodological rigour is evident. Each “theme” is described in a sentence or two and then a quote is provided. This approach is taken throughout most of the results, so that they read merely as a narrative argument. The reader is given no indication how general or variant the themes are. There is also little evidence of any deeper analysis regarding differences between participant’s views, and apart from the emphasis on stigma (which derives mostly from the quantitative data), the strength of different themes is not evident or well supported.

3. The presentation of the quotes is often difficult to follow because no consistent format is applied. Sometimes quotes are presented in quotation marks, sometimes in italics, and often just as straight text. While it is generally evident which text comprises a quote, a consistent and appropriate format for presenting the quotes is required. Similarly, the level of headings used is not always clear. For example, on page 10, there is a heading of Performance followed by Injuries - yet this does not seem to be a sub-heading as it is introduced as “Another important theme raised …”. This relates to an issue of how the themes relate to
each other – in strength and in degree of association. A more rigorous qualitative analysis could provide this information through a concept map or other similar methodology.

5. The participants need to be more fully described. We are told that they comprise 15 elite athletes (9 male and 6 female) aged 16-23 from the AIS. Fundamentally, it is important to know what sports they come from. This relevance of different issues being relevant across different sports is briefly mentioned in several places, so it is important to understand who this small group of athletes comprises in terms of types of sport. A more minor point is that there is redundancy in description of the participants, with a section on ‘Participants’ on page 8 in the methodology and a repetition of most of the same (limited) information in ‘Participant characteristics’ on page 9 in the results. The information in the results section should be incorporated within the earlier section.

6. I would argue that the methodology is highly structured, rather than semi-structured as claimed in the method. It seems the participants were first asked what they think the most important mental health issues are for elite athletes. They are then given definitions of seeking help etc, and asked to write down three barriers (which provides quantitative data), then presented a prescribed set of barriers (derived from prior literature reviews) to respond to; the same approach is then taken for facilitators. This is a highly structured approach. Furthermore, I am not clear how the vignette of “Chloe” fits in and why this was undertaken first, as it would seem to clearly set up some possible expectations among the participants.

7. While the issue of help-seeking among elite athletes is of interest as a point comparison with more mainstream young people and these young people may be a potential risk group in need of intervention themselves, very few implications of the findings of the research are provided. Potential implications are only briefly listed in the three final sentences of the conclusion. Further consideration needs to be given to what this research might mean in terms of better supporting young elite athletes at the AIS and how the experiences of these 15 young people informs better understanding of mental health help-seeking.

**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 I have no competing interests.