Reviewer's report

Title: Identifying Persistent Negative Symptoms in First Episode Psychosis

Version: 2 Date: 28 August 2012

Reviewer: Rajeev Krishnadas

Reviewer's report:

The questions the authors try to answer are relevant and interesting. The main authors have a good track record, and data are from a well-defined cohort. They try to answer a simple question – what are the rates of PNS in a sample of first episode patients? Do different criteria produce different results? And are they different from deficit syndrome? Are they associated with functional outcome?

Major compulsory revisions

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

The questions put in the abstract are well defined. However, on reading the actual manuscript, the introduction is muddled, and the questions that lead on from the introduction, seemed a bit confusing. For e.g. “The main objectives of this paper were two-fold. First, we set out to explore various PNS criteria in order to determine if any one definition was more clinically relevant than the others”.

What does “clinical relevance” mean? While this is the broad “aim” of the paper, the objectives should be more focused and specific. In fact, the whole of the introduction would benefit from being focused and succinct.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

Yes. However, there are a number of areas that are not clear. For e.g. when were the PNS criteria applied to the sample? Were they done retrospectively? The temporal relationship between assessments and when the data for this particular analysis was derived was not clear.

3. Are the data sound?

The data are showing some inconsistencies. Inconsistent reporting of bonferroni correction. What was the rationale behind the multiple testing corrections? Why was it done in some places, but not reported in others (for example in repeated measures statistics?). Why were paired t tests and repeated measures ANOVA done in different places? Why not do the same type of statistical analysis?

There are several inconsistencies in the data presentation and analysis.

For example –
Pg 14 - “PNS_1 Definition: Forty- four patients (27.8%) were identified with PNS and 116 (73%) were not.”
The percentages here add to more than 100%.

Pg 15 – PNS_1 analysis shows the number of participants as 44/116 (see above comment). PNS_2 and PNS_H seem to show exactly the same result, with the same degrees of freedom. While this is possible, the number of people in the analysis does not add up. For e.g. - 21/138 (total 159) in PNS_2 and 21/137 (total 158) in PNS_H group. Why was this?

Also, some of the p values (p<0.052) have been reported as significant. While traditionally p<0.05 is considered significant, why was it considered to be 0.052 in this case?

“Trend” statistics have been reported, while none have been done.

Page: 17 “However, although there was a trend towards a significant [time x group] interaction using the entire PNS_1 cohort, isolation of the “liberal” group from this definition failed to reveal any significant [time x group] interactions (F1,82=0.879, p=0.351).”

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

The above mentioned inconsistencies have to be sorted out.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

The data has to be sorted out clearly, and the analysis reported clearly and consistently.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

Yes

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? Yes

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? Yes

9. Is the writing acceptable?

The manuscript could be much more focused and succinct.

Discretionary revisions

To be extremely finicky as a reviewer, the term “golden standard” is not right – while this term has been used in other papers, the right term is “gold standard” – see below the history of this term in BMJ.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.