Reviewer's report

Title: Young people with depression and their experience accessing an enhanced primary care service for youth with emerging mental health problems: a qualitative study

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Reviewer: Lena Sanci

Reviewer's report:

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

This is a paper about the experience of young people with depression or a related disorder accessing an enhanced primary health care service, established to provide early intervention for young people experiencing a mental health or substance use disorder. It aims to highlight barriers and facilitators to access. It is an important study early in the experience of the new service model particularly to guide future developments of the service.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? Questions in this section are major compulsory revisions

The qualitative method was clearly described.
The participant selection process was clear.
The following paragraph though was a little confusing for someone who is not primarily a qualitative researcher:

“Saturation of themes with ‘thick’ description of the data was obtained when no new data emerged to support the themes. Each theme contained thick descriptions, and deep, dense, depictions [28, 29] of the young people’s experiences accessing the service. It was this process that determined the actual number of participants in the study, an important part of the rigour of the qualitative approach to determining sample size [30, 31].”

I thought that usually interviews proceed until no new themes are emerging – however it appears in the above description that the authors have begun with key themes and stopped when no new experiences emerged within the themes. There is a subtle difference – have the authors pre-defined their themes and see how the data fits under them or do they in fact mean that now new themes are emerging from what the participants say in their interviews?

Under procedure it is customary usually to say which University of Service
Human Research ethics Committee gave approval.

The data analysis section is very confusing and needs to be re-worked to be clearer – perhaps a diagram would help. For example the following sentence is very confusing:

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“The next step was to group codes together into conceptual themes. Themes were then clustered into themes and sub-themes which related to the themes.”

There are too many ‘themes’ going on – can they relabel any to be more descriptive? It is unclear whether the conceptual themes are subsets of the themes which then also have subthemes!!!! I would have thought Themes and subthemes would be subsets of conceptual themes!

I am also not sure what went on when reading the following sentence:

“At the same time, data reduction took place with provisional themes insufficiently grounded in the data being omitted.”

Does that mean that authors’ pre-determined themes were not supported in the data from the young people? If authors had a set of pre-determined themes – what were they? Or, does the sentence mean that some data from young people did not fit into any theme because it was not often expressed? This is a worry if that occurred because in qual work – any theme if contrary to others needs stating as it may be representing a certain view that others may express if there were more data.

When reading the results it appears that the authors actually processed the data in the usual way – ie got the themes from the interviews rather than had pre-determined themes - but it is confusing in the way it is written in the methods.

3. Are the data sound?
I think the results are well expressed

3a) minor essential revision: I would have liked an understanding of whether participants were studying/employed/unemployed & not studying in demographic detail – Table 1 has a symbol “‡= still attending high school “ but this symbol actually doesn’t appear anywhere in the table that I can see. Could the authors attend to this?

3b) discretionary revision: I also would have been interested in any differences by gender as young men in particular are renowned for their greater reluctance to seek help from formal health services particularly for mental health issues. Did the data reveal any particularly different issues for young men compared to young women – were they more likely to experience barriers?

3c) discretionary revision: I also found myself wanting to know the breadth of their means of accessing the service – how many came in with a counsellor, how many were referred from other sources and how many self-referred – this might
have influenced their access barriers. The authors mention that for those not at school or not referred by school counsellors that the pathway to the service was more “tortuous and uncertain” without highlighting what some of these tortuous routes were – they did show that parents not wanting to take them could be a problem but what were the other ways of being referred there and then getting there?

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
Yes, esp validation seems robust

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

5a) discretionary revision: I wonder if it would be good for the authors to discuss the potential of social media as a way to improve young people’s awareness of the service -given this is ever-increasing in popularity and a potentially a good way to ‘market to young people’. Also the role of IT in improving access – for example since this study was probably conducted the headspace sites have launched an e-headspace: https://www.eheadspace.org.au/ This could be mentioned in the discussion particularly around attempting to improve access barriers for those with limited means etc. This also requires evaluation but could be mentioned as a current initiative.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
Yes clearly stated and discussed – relevant to point out that in a future study the ability to look at those failing to attend after referral or a first visit or contact with the service would add another dimension.

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?
Yes, with the exception of the points raised above in the data analysis section

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**
I am a member of the clinical and research excellence committee of the national headspace office and receive a sitting fee for this. I do not have a connection with the particular headspace service in which this study was conducted.