Reviewer's report

Title: Understanding the acceptability of e-mental health - attitudes and expectations towards computerised self-help treatments for mental health problems

Version: 2  Date: 28 January 2014

Reviewer: Adam Geraghty

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions/Major Concerns:

This paper reports the results of a survey of the general populations' attitudes and expectations regarding a range of treatments for mental health problems. It is an important area with e-health only set to grow in a number of health domains.

The manuscript is very well written, and the authors should be commended on their use of the service user advisory group to develop the questionnaires for evaluating mental health treatments.

My main concern is the design of this study. The authors' conclusions, in my view, go beyond their data. This is a problem, as for abstract readers these conclusions may be inadvertently misleading.

The authors state: "Overall, results suggest a poor acceptability for e-mental health and m-mental health in the general population". On my reading, I think what the paper actually shows, in sum, is that a sample consisting of mostly young educated females, expect e/m-mental health interventions to be less helpful than face to face therapy after reading 2-3 sentences describing each treatment. To quote the authors:

"Each type of treatment was briefly explained with a few sentences, as it was possible that not all participants were familiar with the different options"

The core issue with studies such as those presented the current paper, is that participants (if they have not experienced the treatments personally) will be making judgements on very little information. In fact, participants' expectations may be based almost entirely on the description provided by the researcher. An additional sentence may influence expectations one way or another. I think the authors need to present the descriptions of each treatment provided to patients. Still, I am unsure of the broader merit of a samples' perceptions of a minimally described treatment.

An alternative method that may have provided a more useful description, would have been to create a website where participants 1) watched a short clip of face-to-face therapy with a brief explanation, 2) watched a short clip of someone
using a internet intervention with an explanation of the features, 3) a clip of someone reading a self-help book and an explanation, 4) the same as the above but with an app. This would have allowed participants to make judgements based on rich data.

I agree with the authors that acceptability might be an issue with uptake of e-mental health beyond randomised controlled trials. However, whether this paper with the current design and methodology contributes to our understanding of acceptability, is unclear. If we agree that expectations of benefit will be influenced by the description provided, which is a fairly robust hypothesis, to imply that questionnaires like this are accessing/tapping into an already held belief about e-health holds less weight. Expectancies and attitudes may be easily manipulated based on who wrote the descriptions and the details they contained.

If this paper is taken further, the conclusions must be toned down to accurately reflect the limitations of the methodology.

Minor essential revisions:

As stated, the paper is clear, well written and free of errors as far as I can see. The results are clearly explained. My issue is with the design of the study.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.