Reviewer’s report

Title: Experiences in applying skills learned in a Mental Health First Aid training course: a qualitative study of participants’ stories

Version: 1 Date: 20 May 2005

Reviewer: Jeffrey Fuller

Reviewer’s report:

This is an important topic given that many people with mental illness do not seek professional help. The Mental Health First Aid course is a significant intervention in response to this problem and qualitative evaluation research is an appropriate design to add to the controlled trial already conducted.

In my opinion the article still needs more work to explain how the course has been a useful intervention.

1. Background (MAJOR)
There is nothing on the concept of helping from non-professionals and there is minimal literature other than the authors own work on the provision of tools to assist helpers. Hence the findings are not put in a theoretical context.

2. Sample (MINOR)
It is not clear to me how the sample of 158 was derived from the 753 who were recruited into the second controlled trial?

3. Analysis (MAJOR)
The use of informant stories and then across informant themes was a useful approach to elucidate first the interaction (I dont mean this in the quantitative sense) between the situation, action and effect for individuals and then second to describe each theme. No reference is made however on the checks of the rigor of the qualitative analysis.

4. (DISCRETIONARY) Frequencies and cross tabulations are referred to but none described (although this might be warranted on the basis that no association of relevance was found).

5. Findings (MAJOR)
This section is very long. There is more raw text from the interviews than is necessary to illustrate the concepts that are central to answering the research question. The reader is left to do much of the interpretation of this text. If the authors were to synthesise and explain the findings to a greater extent, with illustrative quotes only, then this would make it easier and more informative to the reader. For instance on p13 the point is made about the contrast between the short run and long term changes, but the naming and description of these changes is left in the quotes. I wanted the authors to tell me what these changes were and then to do some further analyse about what these changes might mean. Similarly on page 19 a series of quotes is the description of the useful aspects of the course without any summary or synthesis of these data from the authors. Another example of this is on p20 where it is not clear why the quote is included about the course coordinator living in a dream world.
6. MINOR Is it reasonable to interpret a lack of data about over confidence to suggest that respondents did not bite off more than they could chew as helpers. Perhaps a reservation might be added about such an interpretation, particularly if those who might be over confident where not likely to recognise this.

7. MINOR On page 17 reference is made to Stephen Covey and it is not clear if this is an informant speaking or the authors.

8. Despite my critique of the paper in its present form, there is plenty of material that deserves analysis. For instance, there is more than one quote that illustrates that the course helped people deal with their own previous experiences and so presumably be of help to others. The authors could draw this out and discuss such benefit with reference to other literature about what leads to improved helping skills and this would give the paper greater theoretical depth.

9. Discussion
The three main points of the paper are emphasised here that describe why the course had been of benefit (majority had some post course helping contact/ positive intrapersonal effects/ benefit to a wide range of respondents) and this is the strength of the paper. I suggest that the fourth claim, that the course did not lead neophytes to rush in where angels fear to tread, is more speculative could be left out as one of the concluding points.

Concluding remark
In my opinion the article would be an important addition to the literature if it worked back from these three main findings and include only those qualitative results that are necessary to convince the reader that these findings are credible. Greater reference to the related literature would also enable deeper analytic discussion of these findings.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
'I declare that I have no competing interests'