Author's response to reviews

Title: Mental health consultations in a prison population: a descriptive study

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Mental health consultations in a prison population: a descriptive study

Referee 1

General:
We acknowledge the points made by the reviewer regarding the shortcomings of the design of the study. Although already mentioned in our initial manuscript, the inherent weaknesses of the study are now even stronger underlined and commented upon in the Discussion section (p. 9). Indeed, our next research endeavour includes a survey where we ask all prison inmates in a number of correctional facilities to rate the availability and quality of the mental health services offered.

Minor Essential Revisions:
1. We have now, as referee suggests, throughout the paper stressed that we have not attempted to measure the prevalence of psychiatric disorders in the prison population as such and can only present the therapists’ views regarding the presence of psychiatric disorders and how therapy needs are met (p. 4, p. 9).

2. We have now (p. 3-4) described the screening routine for case-finding in the prison setting.

3. The inmates who received psychotherapy were scored on age as a continuous variable whereas the age of those inmates who did not receive therapy had to be drawn from the general prison statistics which only record age according to age groups. This point is now clarified in the text (p. 4 & 5).

4. Typing errors have been corrected. The confusion regarding preventive detention has been corrected throughout the paper: it is a legal category. The term ‘deviant’ in the first sentence of the paper has been exchanged for ‘disordered’. In addition, the whole manuscript has been corrected by a language consultant.

Referee 2

Minor Essential Revisions (paragraphs numbered consecutively by us):

1. A number of references supporting the differences in psychiatric morbidity between remanded and sentenced prisoners have been added (p. 8). In addition, the issue of prevalence vs. incidence of disorders have been added in the Discussion (p. 8).

2. Some explanations regarding the percentage of inmates with psychotic disorders are now offered (p. 0).

3. The lack of proper diagnostic procedures has been elaborated upon, in response to the identical issue raised by Referee 1 (See Referee 1, Point 1, above).

4. We do agree with the referee but find it hard to state right out that the services are good – as always, there is room for improvement.
5. We have tried to tighten up the paper, although we are a bit unsure about which parts the referee particularly had in mind.

6. We found the suggested literature very helpful and to the point and have added a number of them to our reference list (Teplin, Gunn, Birmingham, Coid, and Andersen). We do however feel that we may maintain our statement about the paucity of studies describing psychiatric services and practices in a forensic setting.

Referee 3

Major Compulsory Revisions:

We do fully agree with the referee’s statement: “The manuscript does not address the topic of outcomes, since actual outcome data have not been collected”. Indeed, we did not attempt to measure outcome. Our main goal was to give a naturalistic description of the psychiatric health services provided for prison inmates in a naturalistic setting. Outcome is of course outcome. But, as Referee 1 points out, even a simple, naturalistic study like ours has its merits because it addresses an important but little investigated area.

We do acknowledge that the main weakness of the study is that it contains no measure of absolute need, or prevalence of need, and depends only on the therapists’ opinion of whether or not needs have been met. This is now clearly stated in the manuscript (p. 9).

Minor Essential Revisions:

We are afraid that we cannot agree with the referee’s opinion about the subject-verb disagreement on Page 8. The subject is The use (not the prisoners), hence the verb should be in singular.

Discretionary Revisions:

We agree that we have not paid sufficient attention to US literature and have now amended this by adding two important works by L. A. Teplin to our reference list.

Points raised by the BioMed Central Editorial Team:

1. The whole manuscript has now been formatted in accordance with the BMC style. In particular, the Abstract has been corrected and the content of the Background section re-worded to correspond with the heading.

2. We are asked to document informed consent. The Norwegian National Committee for Medical Research Ethics considered the project in March 2005 (Ref. 128-05044) and decided that it was not necessary to ask individual prisoners about consent. No direct contact was established with any inmates in connection with the project. Scoring sheets were completed by the therapists and aggregated in order to secure full anonymity for individual prisoners. The Board’s case reference number is now cited in the text (p. 11).

3. All tables are converted from ‘landscape’ to ‘portrait’ format.