Reviewer's report

Title: Interoceptive hypersensitivity and interoceptive exposure in patients with panic disorder: specificity and effectiveness

Version: 2  Date: 30 July 2006

Reviewer: Richard P Swinson

Reviewer's report:

General
The paper addresses an important area of research in the management of panic disorder and agoraphobia. The goal of the study was to assess the effectiveness of standard interoceptive exposure (IE) exercises on the severity of fear of bodily sensations measured by the Body Sensations Questionnaire (BSQ).

Sixty clinical subjects entered the open study and completed assessments of fear, avoidance, panic and fear of bodily sensations. A manualized exposure based treatment ten session group program was used. At baseline, end point and follow up subjects were challenged by IE tasks designed to simulate naturally occurring panic attacks. The similarity of the IE triggered symptoms to non-triggered panic symptoms were assessed by the BSQ.

Factor analysis of the BSQ revealed four factors; pseudoneurological, gastrointestinal and cardiorespiratory fears and dissociative feelings. BSQ symptoms mapped on to three of the factors with no symptoms mapping on to the cardiorespiratory factor.

Post treatment assessment of demonstrated that the "pseudoneurological" fear factor symptoms were reduced in subjects who responded with the greatest increases in fear at baseline to hyperventilation, holding breath, spinning and chest breathing exercises. No pre/post differences were found for other symptom challenges or in the other three BSQ factors.

The study offers useful information about the responsivity of subjects with panic disorder to standard IE challenges. The sample size is small particularly for the number completing treatment (30). There are interesting differences in the responses of the group to respiratory based challenges compared with previous reports. A number of possibilities remain for further study including the use of a control group without panic attacks or without an anxiety disorder, the use of a treatment protocol that omits the heavy emphasis on respiratory training and the study of a larger group of subjects.

Cross cultural comparison of the fear of specific panic symptoms and their provocation by interoceptive challenges would also provide useful information.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

None

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Tables 5 to 8 could be presented within the text to save space.

What next?: Accept after discretionary 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.