Reviewer's report

Title: Lack of cortisol response in patients with PTSD undergoing a diagnostic interview

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Reviewer: Christian Otte

Reviewer's report:

General
This is an interesting study by an established group of investigators who examined the cortisol response and subjective distress in 17 traumatized refugees with PTSD during a detailed and standardized interview about their personal war and torture experiences. This group was compared with a control group of refugees with PTSD (n = 16) in a neutral condition (interview about absorption behavior). The interview did not elicit a cortisol response or an increase in subjective distress.

The topic of “re-traumatization” and trauma-associated arousal is of great clinical interest and very little is known about possible neurobiological correlates of “re-traumatization” or trauma-associated arousal in general. The methods and statistical analyses used seem sound and appropriate and this study potentially makes a valuable contribution to the current literature. However, I have two major concerns at this point that need to be addressed and several aspects that might help to further improve the manuscript.

重大必修修订（作者必须在决定出版前对这些修订进行回应）

1. The whole idea of the study is around cortisol and psychological response to a stressor, i.e. the interview regarding the traumatic experiences. However, virtually no information is given with regard to this interview apart from the fact that it is “detailed and standardized”. The reference given refers to an unpublished manuscript in German. The authors need to present this interview in detail, especially given that their findings regarding lack of psychological response are very surprising. Generally, trauma- and trigger-associated arousal and distress is a hallmark of PTSD. Accordingly, the most established psychological treatment of PTSD (exposure therapy) is based on initial arousal and consequent habituation and memory consolidation over time. Therefore, the authors not only need to present the interview in greater detail but should also discuss why their findings might differ from what is commonly seen in patients with PTSD.

2. According to the methods section, all of the 33 participants were suicidal (9 of them with severe suicidality) which is very unusual and poses many ethical
challenges in a research context. First, the authors should double-check if really all participants were suicidal (how was suicidality assessed?) and if so, how did the authors ensure referral to psychiatric treatment, hospitalization, etc.?

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

1. Regarding table 1, no subscales of the PDS are needed. What is needed is the distribution of the medication, BMI, Age, smoking, etc. between groups and in case there are between-group differences covarying for these variables in the analyses.

2. According to table 1, patients slept on average 3.2 hours the night before examination indicating severe hyperarousal. Even for PTSD patients this can be considered and it seems all the more surprising that the interview did not elicit a psychological response. The authors should comment on this.

3. In the results, it is stated that the “participants performed extremely poorly”. However, no control group is mentioned. Are there established cut-off values, etc. with which the performance of the participants could be compared.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1. I think the introduction is much too long. For example, the information regarding AVP or pharmacological challenge is not needed to my mind.

2. Could the fact that every interview was done with the help of a translator at least in part explain the lack of response?

3. Figure 3 is not needed

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, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests