Reviewer's report

Title: Can pill placebo augment cognitive-behavior therapy for panic disorder?

Version: 1 Date: 11 September 2007

Reviewer: Andrew Baillie

Reviewer's report:

General

This paper describes the meta-analysis of three RCTs in which cognitive behaviour therapy was provided alone and in combination with a pill placebo. The paper is concise, well written and overall uses optimal methods. My main concerns are that the paper may be too brief and that it misses an opportunity to discuss why pill placebos might have such an effect.

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

1. On page 7 “The fact that pill placebo can add to psychotherapy is intriguing” however there is little in the brief discussion that attempts to understand or explain the findings. There is a large literature about outcome expectancies (eg Kirsch, Irving. (1999). How expectancies shape experience. Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.) from which there are direct clinical applications. At least a paragraph on these possible explanations could provide some practical implications from the findings reported in this study.

2. Given there are a small number of studies analyzed, reporting the number of studies where it was necessary to impute the number of responders is important. If this were more than one of the three it may pose a further limitation to the paper.

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

3. On the 2nd last line of page 7 “practices” could be “practice”

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

4. On page 8 low statistical power is raised as an issue – perhaps a post hoc power analysis should be included?

5. Reporting two pooled estimates (post and follow-up) from three trials may not be sufficient for a paper (albeit a brief one). Given these RCTs probably collected
a range of continuous measures rated by both patients and clinicians it would bolster the findings if a consistent picture emerged across a number of outcome measures.

6. Some of the points in the Discussion could be expanded to make it easier for the reader. For example on page 7 the sentence “Twenty-five years ago, Hollon and DeRubeis argued that placebo-psychotherapy combination cannot represent psychotherapy in drug-psychotherapy comparative trials but could not determine whether the former would overestimate or underestimate the latter (Hollon & DeRubeis, 1981)” probably needs a little more explanation.

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

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I have been trained as a cognitive behavior therapist and have specialized in the treatment of panic disorder. More than five years ago I have received speaker honorariums for providing continuing medical education from Glaxo Smith Kline and its predecessors. I declare that I have no other competing interests.