Reviewer's report

Title: Understanding the cognitive and emotional representations of medically unexplained symptoms and its implication on treatment development research: a Sri Lanka Study.

Version: 4 Date: 7 March 2008

Reviewer: Javier I I Escobar

Reviewer's report:

This paper reports on a study of patients with medically unexplained symptoms in Sri Lanka. As part of an intervention study using CBT (which is published elsewhere) the authors used the SEMI, an instrument apparently developed in the UK and based on this outline "cognitive" and "emotional" representation of symptoms among Sri Lankan patients.

I have the following comments about this paper:

1- Paper is unnecessarily long. It should be tightened and condensed with particular attention to the terms and concepts used. There is need for more clarity for the use of terms. Examples are "lay illness beliefs" (page 1, 3, etc.), "emotional domains" (page 2), "lifelessness" (table 1) "internal world", "debilitation", "self abuse" (Table 2) and several others. These should be spelled out more clearly. For example "originating in the body or mind" would be a better way to define internal world, "fatigue" may be better understood than "debilitation" and "substance use" would be more precise than self abuse.

2- In some areas, the paper still looks like a draft (bottom of Table 2, Supernatural? (a better word than magic?........)).

3- Because the paper is entirely focused on the SEMI, this instrument should be included in the title and possibly in an appendix since it is not well known in other countries.

4- It is important to contrast the observations in this Sri-Lankan population to those of studies in the UK to examine cross-cultural differences or similarities.

5- It needs to be spelled out more clearly how the information from the SEMI influenced was incorporated into the intervention.

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 limited interest
Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

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