Reviewer's report

Title: "Five persons in my family have diabetes. Does this have to do with inheritance?" A qualitative study of patients and family members searching for online information about the role of inheritance in diabetes

Version: 1 Date: 2 August 2010

Reviewer: David Whitford

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this paper. I found the use of content analysis of an otherwise unexplored database of interest. However, the major problem that I had with this paper was that it failed to address a clearly enunciated research question and therefore lacked a clear focus in the discussion. I think the authors should rethink what question they are really answering and discuss the results in relation to that question.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The research question needs to be more clearly defined. The aim of the study is expressed as exploring the information needs of patients and family members searching for online information about the role of inheritance in diabetes. In fact, this is not what is described because the internet users had already accessed information from the website. What is explored are the areas of uncertainty or the difficult to understand concepts or the unaddressed information needs of users. This needs to be made more explicit in the research question.

2. The title does not reflect the results of the study. The results of the study suggest people are not asking about inheritance in general but about risk to self or offspring – this is different to what the title suggests. Similarly the abstract needs to reflect an adapted research question.

3. The methods need to be clarified in a few areas. The use of content analysis in this context is interesting. Classical content analysis would assume that the codes of interest have already been discovered and described but in this case it appears that they were identified by a look at the data. Is this the case? In addition, classical content analysis would usually allow independent coding by multiple coders and then examine the degree of inter-observer variation through use of a Kappa statistic rather than discussion within the research team. Was this done and what were the results? This would add to the reliability and external validity of the results. It may seem pedantic but the authors are describing thematic content analysis rather than a pure classical content analysis.

4. I would find it useful to have some indication of what is meant by some terms of degree in the results e.g. 'mainly' women - is that 51% or 90% - I know it is in the table but it is difficult referring back and forth all the time. The use of
qualitative quotes is useful.

5. The discussion on limitations of the study and generalisability needs to be expanded. What are the implications that a younger, female group of internet users have asked these questions and that they are more about risk to offspring than personal risk or risk to other family members.

6. The discussion should be based more around the revised research question. Why are users of the site asking these questions? Are these questions more difficult to understand from the website? What conclusions do the authors draw about the utility of the email approach? What do these questions contribute to the explanation of genetic risk?

Discretionary Revisions

Improvements to areas of grammar e.g. change the passive 'Understanding perceptions, ideas and concerns is required to develop education and improve health information meeting the needs and knowledge of the public' to the active "In order to meet the health information needs of the public, health professionals must understand their perceptions, ideas and concerns.'

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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'