Reviewer's report

Title: Relationships between stress, coping and depressive symptoms among overseas pre-undergraduate Chinese students: a cross-sectional study

Version: 1 Date: 8 February 2011

Reviewer: Stuart Lancashire

Reviewer's report:

Major compulsory revisions

1. As the authors themselves acknowledge, a cross sectional study can only demonstrate an association between variables and cannot be used to infer causality. However, a number of causal inferences do seem to be made in the discussion: e.g. page 10 lines 16-17 'Chinese pre-undergraduates' use of passive emotion-focused strategies significantly and directly increased the severity of their depressive symptoms'; page 11 lines 8-11 'The more serious a burden our respondents found the stress resulting from these circumstances to be, the more likely they were to adopt a passive problem-focused or emotion-focused strategy to cope with it. These strategies failed, in that they led to more severe depressive symptoms.'; page 12 lines 4-5 'In more frail Chinese students, the stress led to an increasingly depressive mood and a greater risk of suicide.' In fact, what the data demonstrate is an association between the type of coping strategy utilised and the concurrent severity of depression, but the causal direction cannot be demonstrated from the data.

Discretionary Revisions

1. The finding that depressed students were more likely to utilise passive coping strategies is clinically important, but a simple unidirectional causal model, in which poor coping leads to depression, is at odds with current cognitive models of depression, which suggest that depression is precipitated and maintained by a more complex set of interactions between mood, thinking, and coping behaviour. In particular, depressed people may be more likely to adopt passive or avoidant coping strategies as a consequence of the hopelessness and lack of self-confidence that typifies depressive thinking. Any public health strategy designed to help vulnerable students adopt more effective coping would need to address the depressive cognitions that prevent them from utilising active and effective coping methods.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.
Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.