Reviewer's report

Title: Coexisting social conditions and health problems among clients seeking treatment for illicit drug use in Finland: The HUUTI study

Version: 1 Date: 2 November 2012

Reviewer: Christine Grella

Reviewer's report:

This article is clearly written and informative regarding the status of participants entering into substance abuse treatment in Finland. The findings are (for the most part) consistent with the extant body of research on characteristics of individuals in substance abuse treatment, including differences by age and gender. Its primary contribution consists of its focus on a sample from Finland and comparison with comparable study samples from individuals in treatment in other countries. The data analyses appear to be competently executed and findings are discussed within the context of other published studies.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. Page 7: the study sample has a very low rate of criminal justice referral (and presumably criminal justice involvement). This finding is quite divergent from studies of treatment samples in the United States where half or more of individuals in substance abuse treatment are currently involved with the criminal justice system and may have been referred to treatment as a result. The authors can expand upon this difference, which may reflect differences in drug policies across countries, with a stronger emphasis on criminal justice interventions related to drug use, and hence more frequent referral into treatment, in the U.S. The sample has a comparable rate of individuals with prior substance abuse treatment, however, as seen in samples from the U.S. (approximately 60%).

2. On a related issue, this generally low rate of criminal justice involvement may have considerable implications for the interpretation of data on motivation for treatment, which the authors discuss on page 12. They could also expand upon this discussion, given that they cite only one study (Simpson & Joe, 1993) that is relatively old, whereas there are numerous other studies that find individuals under criminal justice supervision (or who are coerced to treatment through that system) actually have better retention rates, given the sanctions they may incur as a result of treatment non-completion.

3. Another limitation to note is that given the very large sample size, some of the findings may be statistically significant, but reflect trivial differences that are not very significant clinically. For example, the difference between men and women in psychotic symptoms (18% vs. 22%) may not be very meaningful.

Discretionary Revisions
1. Page 9: It would be useful to compare the reported HIV seroprevalence rate with other samples from drug treatment, especially of primary injection users of opiates

In sum, this paper is generally well done, and although the findings mostly confirm what is already known about the characteristics of individuals (primarily opiate injectors) at the time of treatment admission, its main contribution lies in providing information from a Finnish sample, which may serve as a basis of comparison with other samples of individuals in drug treatment. The paper could be further enhanced by stressing how these apparent differences and similarities reflect broader drug policies that influence the organization and delivery of drug treatment services.

**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