Reviewer's report

Title: Measuring health literacy in populations: Illuminating the design and development process of the European Health Literacy Survey Questionnaire (HLS-EU-Q)

Version: 1 Date: 1 February 2013

Reviewer: Gillian Rowlands

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BMC Public Health review
Measuring health literacy in populations: Illuminating the design and development process of the European Health Literacy Survey Questionnaire (HLS_EU_Q)
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1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
This study does not aim to answer a research question but describes a process by which a new measure of health literacy was developed. The title describes this well.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
Yes this is very clear the methods are appropriate. There are some minor essential points that should be addressed I have listed them below

3. Are the data sound?
Yes

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
Yes

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
Yes

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
Yes

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
Yes

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Yes

9. Is the writing acceptable?
Generally good. There are several typographical errors & the reference numbering is incorrect I have listed these below.

10. Suggested revisions
a. Discretionary revisions
b. Minor essential revisions
i. The reference list of measures of health literacy is too long: this is not a literature review of available measures. The authors should quote a few key examples of different types of measure of health literacy and or previous review of available measures, so that the innovative aspects of their new measure can be illustrated.

ii. There is an error in the reference section. Reference 4 (Berknam) and ref 5 (Davis) are merged as a result the references from this point on are incorrectly numbered & incorrectly referenced in the text.

iii. There is a statement at the end of page 3 that I really do not understand: ‘The distinction between the two types of health literacy measures can be compared to that between an old-fashioned blood-pressure cuff … and a comprehensive health examination’. Are the authors suggesting that one type of examination is better than the other & that a comprehensive health exam is better than measuring some-one’s BP? Surely they are just different and would be used in different ways for different needs and outcomes? Measuring and treating blood pressure is one of the most effective public health interventions available! In the same way, different health literacy measures capture different aspects of this complex construct. What is necessary is clarity about what aspects of HL different measures capture, and that researchers and practitioners then use the appropriate measure. The researchers are clear about what this measure captures but the analogy is unhelpful to their argument.

iv. Page 6: the definition of health literacy given should be referenced
v. Page 7: the Delphi process: was consensus reached by the group? Did all members have to come to full agreement on all points or was partial consensus deemed acceptable?

vi. Page 8: Focus group recruitment. I don’t like the term ‘convenience sample’ – I would prefer exact details of who was approached & why & recruitment rate
vii. Page 8: Please explain why Ireland & the Netherlands were chosen as the field-testing sites? Wouldn’t it have been better to field test in a wider range of countries?

viii. Page 8: details of pre-testing sample: I would suggest this is put into a table
ix. Page 9: point (4) (top of page) in actually part of the field testing not a separate part of the study

x. Page 9: ‘Expert consultation’ should be on a separate line
xi. Page 9: consultation with experts. These should be listed.

xii. Page 10: the ‘consensus based clearing process’ should be explained.
xiii. Page 10: the ‘new items that were added’: were these new items field tested? If not why not?

xiv. Page 12 line 1: I don’t like the word ‘dishonest’ to describe participants’ responses. It would be very unusual for some-one to agree to give up their time for a study & then deliberately lie. It may be, however, that some questions might prompt socially / culturally acceptable responses, and the paper should be reworded along these lines.

xv. Page 13 ‘Expert consultation’ section there is a typo in line 4 it should be ‘by’ not ‘buy’

xvi. Page 14: verb tense should remain consistent

xvii. Page 14 paragraph 1 ‘in Annex’ should read ‘in the Annex’.

xviii. Page 16: paragraph ‘Bridging measurement gaps’: I don’t understand the line ‘However, as a questionnaire in itself it does not imply …. measuring health literacy.’ What do the authors mean by this line?

xix. Reference section: in addition to the numbering (see pint above) reference 10 Weiss et al and ref 12 Wilkinson et al need citation details

xx. Table 2 should list areas of professional expertise of participants

c. Major compulsory revisions

Nothing major

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 am planning work with Dr Sorenson on further applications of the HLS-EU