Reviewer's report

Title: The web of silence: A qualitative case study of early intervention and support for healthcare workers with mental ill-health

Version: 2 Date: 15 October 2013

Reviewer: Fania Gärtner

Reviewer's report:

The manuscript presents a very relevant topic in the field of occupational health. The manuscript is very well written and the Introduction and Discussion provide an impressive overview of relevant studies and developments concerning this issue. However, my major concern regards the limited transparency of and reflection on the used methods. To provide valuable evidence by qualitative research results, authors must provide the opportunity for their readers to judge about the reliability and validity of the study. To realize this, especially the methods and discussion section need to be improved. The questions asked below might help. Also, the COREQ checklist for reporting qualitative research should be followed.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Page 7, paragraph 1: the purpose of the study is formulated very broad. In the Introduction the complexity of the issue is presented very clearly and extensively, by addressing multiple factors and relationships. This depth of the problem is missing in the purpose of the study as it is formulated in the Introduction section. A more precisely formulated research question seems necessary to gain more knowledge and insight into this complex issue, especially as much is known already, as the studies referred to let assume.

2. Furthermore, the purpose of the study is differently formulated in the abstract. The formulation used makes the reader expect that results will be presented and discussed separately for the three forces mentioned individual, social and organizational forces. However, these expectations remain unfulfilled. It is unclear in what way the classification of these three forces have affected the data collected and its interpretation. Has this classification influenced the topic list? Regarding the organizational forces results are presented separately in the Results section, however, it is unclear to the reader which results are seen as individual forces and which as social forces.

Please clarify and adapt in Introduction, Methods and Abstract.

3. Page 8 paragraph 4: The used method is described as “in-depth interviews, both in person and in an online survey format” (In the abstract it is formulated as “An online version of the interview was completed by..”) The term “in-depth” implies an interview process in which open questions are used to further clarify and deepen out the experiences of the person being interviews. This process can never be reached by online surveys, and therefore I regard the used formulation
unsuitable. Please mention the two methods used separately from each other.

4. Page 9, paragraph 3: The analyzing process as described seems very sound; however, I miss any insight into this process in the results section. Especially, as the results are based on the interpretation of data by one researcher only, more insight is needed to value the validity of this work. Also, it is not clear if any theoretical framework or classification defined by forehand influenced the interpretation of data (this question is also related to my point 2, the individual, social and organizational factors).

5. Page 9, paragraph 3: Was a check on the data saturation included? Please describe and discuss in Methods and Discussion.

6. Page 8, paragraph 2: To me the role of the advisory team is not clear. In what way might they have shaped the sample selected for the interviews, the questions asked in the interviews and survey, the interpretations made? And, to what extend might their guidance have jeopardized the objectivity of the researchers? Please add a statement about their neutral attitude and the absence of any self-interest in the Methods (if applicable), or further discuss their role in the discussion.

7. Page 9, paragraph 3: Regarding the validity of the results, the author should explain (in Method section) and discuss (in Discussion section) more on her role and background. For example by answering the following questions: What is her background, what was her role in the organization, what is her experience or training in interviewing and how might these characteristics have influenced the interpretation of data?

8. Page 10, paragraph 2: This point is related to point 2 and 5: in the Results section the authors starts with mentioning that an analysis of the individual knowledge, attitude and organizational barriers was performed. However, this classification is neither further explained nor found back in the results presented. This is confusion for the reader. Please differentiate.

9. Page 10, paragraph 2: Any information about the sample and characteristics about the employees interviewed or given a questionnaire is missing. Please add a description of your sample.

10. Page 25 paragraph 2: The term triangulation seems not appropriate here, as no separate analyses were done for the Interview data and the survey data, as far as I understood from the methods. In the methods section it was mentioned that the questionnaire data complemented the interview data and was used to check the consistency of themes.

11. Page 21 paragraph 2: The discussion section presents an impressive overview of recommendations and literature about interventions for practice and policy changes. However, I miss a reflection on the scientific value of this study and a discussion of limitations. These parts are crucial in scientific communication.

12. Page 25 paragraph 2: The discussion of strength does not fit under the heading “conclusions” but should be part of the discussion, e.g. under the header: methodological notes.
Minor Essential Revisions
13. Page 4 paragraph 1: “Presenteeism is significant issue.” should be “Presenteeism is a significant issue.

Discretionary Revisions
14. Page 4 paragraph 1: The manuscript starts with the sentence “Healthcare workers in Canada report high levels of...”. This issue is generic for most industrializes countries. To make this paper interesting and applicable for the whole readership of BMC Public Health, I suggest to widen the issue of your study to more than just Canada in the Introduction and Discussion section of the manuscript.

15. Page 4 paragraph 1: The reference given for the definition of Presenteeism is a design study. By now results of the RCT referred to are published as can be found in PubMed. e.g., Gärtner FR, Nieuwenhuijsen K, Ketelaar SM, van Dijk FJ, Sluiter JK. The Mental Vitality @ Work Study: Effectiveness of a Mental Module for Workers' Health Surveillance for Nurses and Allied Health Care Professionals on Their Help-Seeking Behavior. J Occup Environ Med. 2013 Oct;55(10):1219-1229.

16. Page 4 paragraph 1, the sentence “Conversely, delays in providing psychiatric treatment...”: By changing the word “psychiatric” into “psychological”, it might become clearer that mental ill-health does not only concern severe mental disorders, but often also mild to moderate mental health complaints, however, which also can affect work seriously.

17. Page 7 paragraph 2, can you refer to a study explaining the design of a “qualitative case study”?

18. Page 9, paragraph 1: Was there a topic list used to structure the interviews? If so, please present in the methods section.

19. Page 10 paragraph 4 – page 11 paragraph 11: In this paragraph two themes are presented, first, the worker who does not dare to tell about his/her own mental health problems, and second, the co-worker or manager who does not dare/want to talk about the mental health problems of an employee. These two themes might interact with each other based on complex underlying processes. As the author does not discuss this, to my opinion the two themes can better be presented separately.

20. Page 13 paragraph 2: The same (as in point 18) holds for the “reluctance to seek help” and “reluctance to offer help”. Different underlying processes lead to this behavior, thus I would prefer to regard these themes separately.

21. Results section as a whole: The themes themselves are described very clearly and the citations from the interviews are very well chosen and demonstrative. However, as a lot of information is given in the results, a table that summarizes the results, and eventually presents any possible relationships between the themes might be very helpful for the reader, to get an overview. Also a differentiation on what relates to the behavior of the workers who have impaired mental health and was relates to the co-workers and managers would
be helpful.

22. Page 17 paragraph 2: please explain what “employee assistance programs” are, in a why you did for the “attendance management programs” on page 18.

23. Page 19 paragraph 2: speaking of “norm” based on qualitative research results to me seems unsuitable. Maybe you can find another suitable term.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests'