Reviewer’s report

Title: Impact of Extra Front Counselling Sessions through Phone Calls On Smoking Cessation Outcomes among Smokers in Penang State, Malaysia

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Reviewer: Susan M Zbikowski

Reviewer’s report:

I would be happy to re-review the manuscript but am unable to do so until the authors address a substantial point that I raised.

In my review I stated the following concern.

1. One fundamental issue with the paper is that it is really not designed to answer the question if front loaded counseling improves outcomes. The intervention differs from the standard of care in several significant ways: timing, intensity, length of contact, and type of delivery. So, with the current design it is not possible to conclude that the intervention worked due to front loading or due to the additional contacts with the counselor that could range in 40-60 additional minutes of counseling. The authors would have had an attention control with additional non-counseling contacts at the same time and for the same duration in order to truly evaluate if front loading of calls works.

Below is what the authors replied.

The reviewer’s comment is highly appreciated. However, there were no significant differences between the intervention control group except for the 4 additional phone calls in the first month of the quit attempt (i.e., both groups received the standard care which consist of individual counselling last for 20-30 minutes and phone calls last for 10-15 minutes as well as self-help materials). Kindly, refer to figure 1 which illustrates the follow-up status for each randomized participant.

I do not believe the authors understand my comment. Basically, I am taking issue with the title of the paper and the conclusion. The paper is titled "Impact of Extra Front Counselling Sessions through Phone Calls...." The authors report statistically significant outcomes at 6 months. The intervention group had better results than the control. I do not believe it is accurate to say that it is due to front loading of calls only. While it is true that the authors added calls prior to standard services this is not the only way in which the intervention group differed from the control. It is possible that the authors could have gotten the same outcome by adding calls at another time period - in the middle, throughout, or at the end. Their current study design doesn’t allow them to tease this apart. Furthermore, the intervention group also differs in terms of having additional contacts and that these additional contacts result in more time in treatment (more minutes). It is my
suggestion that the authors strike front loading from the title and in any concluding statements (such as the last statement of the abstract "Therefore, the front loading counselling is a promising treatment strategy that should be evaluated further"). It would be appropriate to leave this level of information in the methods so that others can replicate their methodology.

I would be happy to read the rest of the authors responses/changes, but I really don't want to do so until this fundamental point is addressed.