Reviewer’s report

Title: Long-term stability of return to work after a workplace-oriented intervention for patients on sick leave for burnout

Version: 2 Date: 6 May 2014

Reviewer: Wim Grooten

Reviewer’s report:

MAJOR COMPULSORY REVISIONS

A. (Re)formulate the aim. There is a discrepancy between different formulations of the aim of the study in several places in the paper and in the abstract. (see below on point 1)

B. Clarify the methods – for example on the “number of episodes”. The first line in the results section gives results on this variable, but it is not very clear how this variable is constructed. Moreover, it was difficult to follow the authors on which period was studied (12 months, 80 weeks or 130 weeks). The text in the results section is about week 60 and 70, but the figures only between 80 and 135. In the discussion it is mentioned that this study is a 1-year continuous prolongation of the original 18-month follow-up.

C. Restructure the results section so it is in line with the aim and the research questions.

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS

D. Reformulate the abstract. There is a discrepancy between the text in the paper and the abstract. For example, the aim and the main results. Please mention also the number of subjects included in the study.

E. Check your references: you have numbers in the text, but not in the reference list. Sometimes the doi-number is given, sometimes not. There is one reference that seems to be incomplete (Österberg, 2012).

F. If there is more information about the subjects at time of follow-up, please add this to the manuscript.

G. There is no reference to table 1 in the text. By the way, why do we need all this information for only one group –we need this information also for the control group, and perhaps - because we know that there is a discrepancy between the two age groups - is there a possibility to divide table 1 into the two groups?

DISCRETIONARY REVISIONS

H. See the comments in the manuscript and the last part of point 7.

ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS BMJ
When assessing the work, please consider the following points:

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

I succeeded to understand the aims of the study, but it was unclear until I read the discussion. I believe there is a need for reformulation and clarifying the aims. In the current version, the aim of is described differently on several places in the paper: in the abstract it is formulated like

Authors: It was directed to classify the stability of the results of a work-place oriented return-to-work (RTW) program for patients on a long-term sick leave for work-related burnout. …but the question was how stable it was, as they had remaining symptoms on a number of scales.

In the introduction several times the authors mentions some aspects that will be studied in the paper.

Authors: Although an investigation of the actual fulfillment of plans and agreements is beyond the scope of the present study, the main outcome measure, i.e. RTW, will be analyzed. Thus, one main question concerns the sustainability of RTW. It has also been suggested that part-time RTW could be a pathway to full-time work [7] – an interesting assumption that requires further examination.

And in the end of the introduction part these aspects are formulated into three questions:

Authors: The present aims are to study (a) whether RTW after a specific workplace-oriented intervention for persons on sick leave due to burnout was sustained or increased after an additional twelve months, (b) whether or not initial part-time RTW led to later full-time RTW, and (c) whether the intervention speeds up the course of RTW, as indicated by a converging RTW rate between the two groups with a delay.

Further on (in the participants section!), there is another aim of the study mentioned.

Authors: The aim of the present study was to follow up RTW for the 74 individuals with clinical burnout (Swedish diagnosis: Exhaustion Disorder) who participated in our first study (2003-2006) and the 74 untreated subjects.

Finally, in the beginning of the discussion section, the authors present a final aim

Authors: The main aim of the present study was to test whether our previously shown successful RTW after a workplace-oriented intervention, for subjects on sick leave due to burnout, was sustained and stable or possibly increasing in a longer time perspective.

In conclusion, I believe it is important for the authors to formulate clearly the aim in the last sentences of the introduction part and then the three research questions. Then the results should follow this structure, both in the paper and in
the abstract. In the discussion part, the three questions are answered, but I searched for this structure also in the results part. If the authors want to keep the results as presented (like the division in young/elderly age-groups), then the authors should add a research question about it, for example: Is age a predictor for good sustainability in RTW?

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

It is somewhat unclear the length of the studyperiod that is studied. In the results, the authors talks about the main effects that stabilizes after week nr 60 and 70. Moreover, the figures show results on weeks after 130 (135?).

On other thing that could be improved is that the authors could help the reader to interpret the statistics on effect size. The authors present p-values and b-values but in reality, how many subjects have returned to work? How many patients had part-time RTW at baseline and at time of follow-up?

3. Are the data sound?

Yes there is no reason to doubt this.

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

Yes, but there are results presented in the discussion section, while it should be presented in the results section. Moreover, it should be interesting if the authors can show some more information about the patients at time of follow-up. At the moment there is a lot of baseline information (from the first study) that is not used in the analyses or taken into account for.

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

Yes, the discussion part is great, however there is a need for data (text, a table or figure) that can give the data for the last sentence of the conclusion.

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, however, in the abstract the number of patients follow-up can be added.

9. Is the writing acceptable?

Yes
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