Reviewer's report

Title: Measuring the effects of acupuncture and homoeopathy in general practice: An uncontrolled prospective documentation approach

Version: 1 Date: 20 November 2003

Reviewer: Stefan N Willich

Reviewer’s report:

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Methods
· The selection of the study physicians should be described more detailed.

Statistics
· General linear models that correct for the point of time when the questionnaire was answered can help to get more valid results in cases when a high rate of questionnaires were filled out to late.

Results
· Characteristics of patients and doctors are reported together for the homeopathy and the acupuncture group, but later results are reported separately. This should be consistent. Also it would be more interesting to show results together for each outcome parameter and both treatment groups.

· Quality of life results are presented separately for main measurement points and follow-up. Because of this, baseline and first follow up are not represented in Figure 2 and 4. Including this data would greatly improve information conveyed by these figures.

Minor Compulsory Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Abstract
· “day-to-day practice” could be replaced by “routine care” or “general practice”

Methods
· The main outcome criteria are reported under the headline Health insurance data. They should be shifted to the appropriate place.

Table 1
· The heading “Baseline characteristics” might be more to the point than “Sample descriptors”

Table 2
· It is not clearly described whether the number of patients refers only to the acupuncture/homeopathy patients or to all patients in the physicians practice (a minimum of 4 patients seen quarterly is very low).
· The variable “Time of practice” should be more clearly described; for example “Time doctor spend per patient”.

Table 4
· For effect size, ranges for small, middle and large effects should be shown in the legend.
Figure 2 and Figure 4
- These figures are a combination of figure and table, resulting in the problem that the scaling of the x axis is not clear enough. Figure and table should be presented separately.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Abstract:
- The abstract is not detailed enough. Results should be presented including data. Sample sizes should be reported.
- The conclusion that “the results showed clear evidence of a subjective benefit from acupuncture and homeopathy” is too strong for the used study design. The conclusion should be more conservative, because this study design cannot guarantee that the patients did not use other therapies that may have caused the effect.

Methods:
- Patient inclusion and exclusion criteria should be reported.
- The main outcome is assessed using patients questionnaires but the pathway of information from these questionnaires is not described detailed enough. Bias would be very possible if the design did not guarantee that the physician were blind regarding the patients’ answers.
- Data Handling. The authors reported that it was ensured that the doctor’s rating was given for every patient. It is difficult to believe that the return rate of the primary outcome (patients questionnaires) dropped to 50% while there is absolutely no missing data in the physicians’ rating.

Results:
- The sample sizes in the results are not clear. It is reported that overall 5292 patients were treated with acupuncture and 933 with homeopathy. Table 1 reported the baseline characteristics of only 5116 acupuncture patients and 515 homeopathy patients. It is not clear what happened with the other patients.
- A return rate of 50% after 24 months follow-up is described as ‘considerable’ by the authors. Compared to other studies in this field which show a much higher return rate the ‘considerable’ should be deleted.

Discussion
- Again the authors state ‘clear evidence’ (see above under ‘abstract’) and should judge the results more conservative.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
None