Reviewer's report

Title: Help-seeking before and after episodes of self-harm: A qualitative and quantitative study in school pupils in England

Version: 1 Date: 21 December 2007

Reviewer: Kamaldeep Bhui

Reviewer's report:

This is a study of help seeking among adolescents who self harm, presenting some of the findings from a larger survey, reported elsewhere. This is an important study as we need to learn more about self harm among adolescents, what triggers it and how they cope with it.

The paper consists of 1) cross sectional data with quantitative information on a priori categories of help providers sought by subjects before and after self harm; 2) open ended questions analysed qualitatively.

Section 1 is good, section 2 needs more work, and the two need linking.

The authors should help readers with some methodological description and how this paper relates to others from the same study, and how it is different from others.

The authors describe that mixed methods research is a strength in their study. However, the quantitative and qualitative collection was not designed to enrich each other or be complementary. Mixed methods usually use qualitative work to deepen the findings of quantitative work, or to address different more uncertain questions. Here data are presented side by side, and the qualitative analysis is descriptive and not going into sufficient depth to generate new hypotheses in a confident manner. The presentation of data may not justice to the rigour applied. Could the findings be presented to identify specific important issues in more depth rather than lots of issues superficially? Indeed, a table could summarise the sorts of issues and numbers of participants saying them, and then the text could be devoted to deepening some of the findings to convey the new model is based on the way young people anticipate, experience, and react to self harm.

Qualitative studies are also made up of a purposive sample usually to test a specific set of questions and poorly understood issues. It should not be implied that such studies are generalisable.

Illness perception theory and explanatory model theory already provides a framework by which individual experience distress or illness, appraise it and respond in a variety of ways. The authors should take an existing framework and adapt it or develop it if justified rather than to start from scratch. This may also help organise some of the findings into more succinct sections.
The paper frames its objectives as describing help seeking and barriers to help seeking, but not much on perceptions of self harm which are identified as an omission in the introductory literature on page 7. More on perceptions of the problem would be useful as this usually determines help seeking, and may vary with age, gender, and ethnic group.

Ethnicity is mentioned in the methods but not commented on further. An ethnic breakdown would be helpful.

The qualitative findings are interesting, but the classification developed does not easily hang together

Figure 1, might be improved to read response rates at each stage, and to ensure it is understood that the qualitative findings on help seeking were based on 48 seeking help before DSH and 6 seeking help after DSH. Therefore this is not representative of the population, and the authors ought to be cautious about giving the impression that the work is all of a large sample size (e.g.page 55). A table of numbers reporting specific perceptions, help seeking etc, would enable development of theory in the text rather than reporting descriptive findin

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: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

We have completed work on self harm in adolescents and ethnicity; Phd Student working with me is investigating similar issues in a qualitative study. This is unpublished work.