Reviewer's report

Title: No job return for back pain disability pensioners: 3-year follow-up after a randomized controlled trial

Version: 1 Date: 20 March 2009

Reviewer: Cécile Boot

Reviewer's report:

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

Major Compulsory Revisions

This study has 2 aims:
1. to investigate whether disability pensioners with back pain who entered a RTW process following an RCT at one year follow up had actually returned to work in the next two years
2. to compare the research population from the RCT with the general population of disability pensioners with LBP and with other musculoskeletal disorders.

I have some remarks on the choice of these questions:
1. Why is it interesting to do a follow up of another 2 years on an RCT with poor results at 1 year follow up?
2. The check of the authors on the comparison of their study population with the general population is useful, however, this should have been part of a discussion paragraph in their article describing the results of the RCT, and is, as far as I'm concerned, not an article on itself
3. When comparing the study population with the general population, more variables should be compared than only sex, age and outcome. The authors describe in their introduction (p4) that they were concerned that their participants were in poorer health or less motivated. However, they do not have data to prove or reject these concerns. The fact that no differences were observed between the sample and the total population, does not rule out such differences.
4. Finally, the small number of the participants who started a RTW process would need a qualitative way of analysis, and not quantitative. Interviews with these people would have given more information about why they did not succeed.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

- Major Compulsory Revisions

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sample and the total population, does not rule out such differences.

- Discretionary Revisions

The authors should reconsider their text in the introduction about their trial. Some information should be better positioned in the methods section.

3. Are the data sound?

- Major Compulsory Revisions

I need more information about the Norwegian system on disability pension to be able to check the assumption that a reduction in payment from the disability pension implies return to work.

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

no specific comments

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

- Major Compulsory Revisions

In the discussion paragraph, text is added about beliefs, which is not relevant for the research question. Secondly, when only age and sex are compared, you cannot state that 2 populations are comparable in general.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

- Major Compulsory Revisions

Limitations are not formulated in the discussion section. I would suggest to include a paragraph methodological considerations (e.g.,) in which the authors discuss their assumption to use reduction in payment as an indicator of RTW. In addition, the small number of the participants who started a RTW process would need a qualitative way of analysis.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

- Discretionary Revisions

The authors should carefully check where they present the information about their RCT, some information is now presented in the methods, and some in the background. I would prefer to place this in the method section.

Some parts of the discussion are not relevant (section about positive beliefs etc.), based on the data available.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

- Major Compulsory Revisions

The reasoning for a comparison between the two reference groups is not explicated in the background of the abstract.
9. Is the writing acceptable?
- Discretionary Revisions
  I would suggest to ask a native speaker to check the English language

**Level of interest**: An article of insufficient interest to warrant publication in a scientific/medical journal

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

**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'