Author’s response to reviews

Title: Back pain outcomes in primary care following a practice improvement intervention:- a prospective cohort study

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Version: 3 Date: 29 December 2010

Author’s response to reviews: see over
Response to Re-review

Reviewer Paolo Pillastrini

Comment: “The Population paragraph of the Methods section is not clear. Please split it into three different parts showing:

1. the characteristics of the sample used
Response: The characteristics of the patient sample are Results because they are only explicitly known after the data have been collected. This is already detailed in the first paragraph of the Results as well as in Table 1. We assume that the reviewer wishes us to describe how patients were recruited, so this is now the first part.

2. the inclusion and exclusion criteria
Response: This has been done.

3. characteristics of professionals (degree, job, etc) who participated at the study.
Response: The practice teams were not all professionals (i.e. some were administrative staff and some patients). Only the doctors, nurses and physiotherapists were professionals. We did not record what degrees these had. Therefore, we have described the membership of the practice teams under the heading “Characteristics of the practice teams”.

We assume that the reviewer does not wish us to exclude the existing description of the data collection for the practice database study, so this is now described under an additional heading

Comment: “I don’t understand why the Authors state: This has been done” at our comment. “Report confidence intervals in Table 2 and centre the table”. The table is the same.
Response: This was done, but may not have uploaded properly. We have uploaded it again. Apologies if this was our error. Please note, use of the editing tool may have perturbed the alignment of the table.

Comment: This part of the work “A co-ordinator made telephone contact within one week, obtained final consent and the patient baseline questionnaire was then completed” should be inserted in “Intervention” and not in “Population” paragraph.
Response: This has been done. However, we believe it is incorrect to describe data collection as part of the intervention in epidemiological studies.

Comment: “Project Wiki need a reference or an explanation”
Response: An explanation has been added

Comment: The “quality improvement facilitator must be explained also in the text”
Response: This has been done.

Comment: Please insert the version number of Microsoft Excel used
Response: This has been done.
Reviewer Alexis Descatha

Comment: “..however, I feel there are still some confusion on the organisation of the manuscript. – First, the purpose of the study is “lost” in the background and other experience.”
Response: We agree. It has been challenging to both describe a novel educational intervention and evaluate its effects and their predictors, while also reflecting on changes in practice activity and referral patterns. We have, therefore, added a summary paragraph (p7) more clearly stating the overall purpose of the study, and an additional sentence in the conclusions (and abstract) to reflect the extent to which we think this purpose was served.

Comment: “The flow charts should be clear of inclusion, non-inclusion, exclusion and reasons”
Response: It was not possible to get GPs to record which patients were considered, but were not entered, because of ineligibility or unwillingness to participate. However, we have extended the flow chart (Figure 1) to include information on dropouts and incomplete data.

Comment: “Finally, authors should discussed their limits and their strength (not only admit limits but discussion about the characteristics of their sample, the literature…) I think a methodologist could be helpful (including the one from the famous MRC unit).
Response: We have included a new section on the strengths and limitations of the study at the beginning of the Discussion (p15), gathering points from later in the manuscript and focussing more on the difference of purpose between this and previous studies..

Comment: “Please also put references at the end of sentences in the text…”
Response: This has now been done for most references except a few where we think it would make attributing the reference to its accompanying statement difficult for readers.

Comment: “..and P<0.05 and significant in the same sentence (define the P level in the method section is sufficient).”
Response: We have defined the P level in the first paragraph of the Analysis section in Methods and removed “p<0.05” when indicating significance.