Reviewer's report

**Title:** Evaluation of a structured goal planning and tailored follow-up programme in rehabilitation for patients with rheumatic diseases: Protocol for a pragmatic, stepped-wedge cluster randomized trial

**Version:** 2  
**Date:** 16 December 2013

**Reviewer:** Francisco JAS Alburquerque-Sendín

**Reviewer's report:**

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISION

This is a well written study and it is of interest for publication. Multidisciplinary treatments should be the usual way of addressing chronic disorders, as occurs with rheumatic diseases. The study was performed soundly with good methodological care, and the results could have a large impact in the practical scenario. Thus, the proposed study design (a pragmatic, multicentre, stepped-wedged cluster randomized controlled trial) is correct for testing the hypothesis. As stated, the methods section affords sufficient details to allow replication of the study. Finally, the manuscript adheres to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition. Nevertheless, some specific inconsistencies can be identified.

**Background**

- Page 4, second paragraph (lines 1-4): The first two sentences of the paragraph must be accompanied by references supporting the text.
- Page 4, third paragraph (lines 4-10): The last sentences of the paragraph must be accompanied by references supporting the text.

**Methods**

- I am not sure if the verb tenses are sufficiently homogenous throughout the text. This is a study protocol without results. So, the study WILL BE developed, instead of the study WAS developed. The dates when the centres were included (2011 and 2012) do not help to understand the time/sequence of the study (the status of the trial in www.controlled-trials.com is COMPLETE -8/12/2013-). The authors must take care with this.
- Page 5, second paragraph: The homogeneity of the participating centres (clusters) must be assessed and/or ensured.
- Page 6, first paragraph (line 1): Was previous multidisciplinary treatment not an exclusion criterion? This should be stated.
- Page 6, last paragraph, and page 7, first paragraph: Did the identified opinions and experiences of the providers change the intervention protocols? If so, how were those changes applied?
- Page 7, second paragraph: The usual treatments received by the subjects
should be described briefly.
- Page 7, fifth paragraph: The objectives of the new program are interesting but somewhat excessive. The objectives should be tempered.
- Page 8, third paragraph: As one of the innovations of this study, the content of the telephone calls should be detailed.
- Page 8, fourth paragraph: check references.
- Page 8 and 10: please, afford reliability data of the assessment tools for this population.
- Page 9, third paragraph: why did the authors use two HRQL questionnaires? It is important to explain the relevance of the second assessment (SF-36).
- Page 10, second and third paragraphs: similarly, the authors should explain why two different scales for assessing exercising/physical activity were applied.

Discussion
- Page 12, second paragraph: What are the authors’ reasons for believing that the stepped-wedge design could reduce the drop-out rate?
- Page 12, fourth and fifth paragraphs: The order of these two paragraphs could be changed in order to follow a more logical sequence.
- Finally, although the results are not presented, the limitations of the study protocol could add further interesting information (CONSORT 2010 Declaration, item 20).

In sum, the manuscript has potential for publication but the changes indicated above must be made.

**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.