Reviewer's report

Title: Low back pain education and quality of life: a randomized trial [ISRCTN48558333]

Version: 2 Date: 18 August 2006

Reviewer: Wilfried Mau

Reviewer's report:

General
The design of a RCT in the important issue of the effect of back school is certainly a positive aspect of the study. However, the study has several major drawbacks.

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

1. The major flaw of the study is the inadequate control group. The study cannot answer the question, wether the specific content of the back school programme is effective, concerning the choosen outcome of quality of life as measured by the SF 36. Regarding the high proportion of housewifes (88 % in the intervention group, 75 % in the control group), the effect of nonspecific attention particularly in persons with perhaps limited social contacts should have been controlled for. It may well be, that nonspecific attention or the company of others in the patient group combined with low level physical activity is sufficient to reach the same results. For example, participation in a walking group or, if this is not practicable in Iran, another group activity of the same duration as in the intervention group could have answered the question of the specific effect of the programme.

2. It is necessary to provide more details on the medication in both groups during the study period. In the second paragraph on page 11 antidepressant and analgesic medication is mentioned in the clinic group. Different drugs and dosages in the intervention group compared with the control group may influence the results.

3. The information, that most of the patients were suffering from discopathies is given rather late on the final page of the article. This important patient characteristic, the methods of ascertainment, and the frequency of pathological neurological findings must be included in the materials and methods section on page

4. The discussion lacks focus. For example, with the exception of the two sentences at the beginning, the second paragraph on page 10 contains a lengthy discussion of trivial aspects of a controlled study design. The following paragraph of the discussion on page 10 and 11 is rather speculative.

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

1. In table 1 some categories are ill defined, e. g., income (household income ?, cut offs of the categories?), definitions of the exercise categories "always" and "occasionally", definitions of proper chair, proper shoes and proper bed.

2. The tables 2 5 repeat data. They should be integrated in one table.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Reject because scientifically unsound

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published
Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.