Reviewer’s report

Title: Pretreatment organ function in patients with advanced head and neck cancer: Clinical outcome measures and Patients’ views

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Reviewer: Hisham Mehanna

Reviewer’s report:

This is a good comprehensive piece of work, with obvious benefit to clinicians and researchers in head neck cancer. The pretreatment characterisation of disability in head and neck cancer has hitherto been patchy, and this work will help elucidate that.

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined? yes
2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? yes
3. Are the data sound? Yes but see below
4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? yes
5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? yes
6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated? See below
7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? yes
8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found? yes
9. Is the writing acceptable? Very good

My main concerns about this paper is

a. the choice of assessment instruments; this is always a vexing issue on studies such as this as there are no agreed tools to use. However it would seem that the authors did not use any of the validated widely used tools eg eortc. This in itself is disappointing as it decreases the utility of the data they provide…in that clinicians are now used to the common questionnaires and would understand them more than less common ones.

b. Furthermore it is not clear of many of the tools used were validated properly previously eg FOIS, PAS, Residue scales. Furthermore it appears that the authors used some questions from other tools – in which case the proven validity of the questions is then disrupted. In addition it seems that there were many questions were formulated specifically for this study – in which case their validity is not proven.

I understand that probably the reason for this is that there were no adequate specific scales, although there are now many scales for assessment of specific
functions in head and neck – albeit many have not been validated properly. Therefore this point should be clarified and expanded on in the discussion, and probably included as a limitation of this study.

c. The methodology and results on the assessment of validity of the specific questions used for the assessment of specific functions should be clarified in the paper. Again as these are not validated questions (from what I can elucidate) then this should be discussed in the discussion section. For example, it is conceivable that the reason that there is a discrepancy between objective measures and patient subjective reporting is that the questions used are unclear, and not valid! This should be pointed out clearly in the discussion as a potential limitation of the study.

d. Were the questions given to patients in Dutch or in English? The reason is that some of the questions attached in the appendix are ambiguous eg how is your smell? Or How do you experience your mouth opening? Also the choice ‘rather’. Can I confirm that this is a translation and that the questionnaire was in Dutch?