Reviewer’s report

Title: The experience of palliative patients and their families of a family meeting utilised as an instrument for spiritual care: A qualitative study

Version: 2 Date: 30 November 2010

Reviewer: Irene J Higginson

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This paper uses a qualitative study to describe the family meeting as an instrument for spiritual care. The authors set out in the background and define spirituality as ‘the web of relationships that gives coherence to our lives’. They use a family meeting (a common practice in many aspects of health care) to improve this issue and have studied this informed by the methods of hermeneutic phenomenology – which seeks to reveal and convey deep insight and understanding of the concealed meanings of experiences based on observation and interpretation.

In general the paper is well written and interesting. Many of the aspects of the methods are clear.

The authors definition of spirituality is somewhat narrow – see perhaps the recent critique in the nursing literature - J Clin Nurs. 2009 Jun;18(12):1666-73. A critical view of how nursing has defined spirituality. Clarke J. More common definitions set out spirituality as ‘a search for meaning, which may or may not include belief in a higher power’ (see chapter by Speck P in Management of Advanced Disease, or Kearney and Mount in Handbook of Psychiatry in Palliative Medicine). I wonder if focussing on the web of relationships would be seen by many in the spiritual field as being too restrictive and lacking the concept of ‘meaning’ which pervade many definitions. This questions the title and the approach and needs discussion.

Some of the references and literature on definitions and concepts is rather old and would benefit from updating with some of the newer literature and models, such as those published in Soc Sci Med.

The methods of reporting hermeneutic (or interpretative) phenomenology have much criticised in the literature. Guidelines for reporting such studies are available. In general these include: assessing the credibility, fittingness, auditability and confirmability (see J Adv Nurs. 2006 Jul;55(2):215-29. Critical appraisal of rigour in interpretive phenomenological nursing research. de Witt L, Ploeg J.). The paper needs to assess its ability to stand up to these criteria. In this regard aspects of the method are missing – for example it would be usual to see two coders of the qualitative themes, or at least one checking another – this is not apparent in the text. This is especially important as its gives credibility to the themes identified. It is not clear how the quotes were chosen. In general in
qualitative research it is important to look not only at confirmatory but also deviant cases as these often provide important information – how were these handled by the authors?

In addition it would be helpful for the broad range of readers of BMC journals (and this reviewer) to see the authors definition of hermeneutic phenomenology and a rationale of why they chose this particular approach rather than other qualitative approaches.

Of the 66 patients offered the family meeting only 12 eventually accepted it, most because of refusals. This brings into question the acceptability of the family meeting in this context. This point needs greater discussion.

The family meeting is now reported quite widely. Their purpose is seen more broadly that that in this paper – e.g. for information sharing (Palliat Med. 2009 Mar;23(2):150-7. Family meetings in palliative care: are they effective? Hudson P, Thomas T, Quinn K, Aranda S.) – and there is also evaluative studies on training staff to conduct the family meetings (Palliat Support Care. 2009;7(2):171-9. Conducting family meetings in palliative care: themes, techniques, and preliminary evaluation of a communication skills module. Gueguen JA, Bylund CL, Brown RF, Levin TT, Kissane DW.) . Therefore it would be helpful if this paper could consider more specifically its own contribution to the literature, where is it adding value? I would have thought examining the role of the family meeting in providing spiritual support – would be valuable – as opposed to the other roles which are more restrictive. While the same themes might emerge it would help the readers to put it into a wider context.

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I have no competing interests