Reviewer's report

Title: De-tabooing control of dying. A grounded theory study.

Version: 2 Date: 31 July 2012

Reviewer: Joachim Cohen

Reviewer's report:

This article makes an interesting effort to explore the discourse around control and autonomy in dying in contemporary Western society.

However, I feel that the article suffers from several flaws as a result of which the article does not seem to make a very relevant contribution to the social theory about controlled dying.

Major compulsory revisions

First, the article fails to formulate a clear research question, justify that question, and frame it within a wider academic and social theoretical context.

The authors write that the purpose of the article was to present a grounded theory of dying, but this is overly generalistic. From a lecture of the results it seems more reasonable to state that the aim of the article was to explore the discourse around controlled dying or to explore what concepts are used in this discourse. Of course the results then also need to address this research aim. I believe that the results and the discussion will also make a lot more sense if they specifically address this question. Currently the results seem to be a very subjective selection of findings the authors found interesting. The article needs a better ‘grip’ to structure and interpret the results.

Second, the methods need a clearer explanation and presentation. The reason why and the manner in which the two surveys are used to address the research question needs to be explained more clearly and the rationale for its use should be explained (ie what is the added value of using this data for this article as compared with for instance only qualitative interviews). It needs to be explained whether the two surveys used an identical questionnaire (in which case it would be better to speak of 1 questionnaire held among the general public and among physicians) or not (in which the important differences in questions need to be indicated). Also try to be clearer throughout the text that you used these surveys to analyse the open text fields of the survey. It seems a bit strange at first to read that surveys will be used for grounded theory.

Throughout the article I also had the feeling that quantitative approaches (eg presentation of the survey results, orientation towards 'explaining' in stead of ‘understanding’) and qualitative approaches were used interchangeably. Try to avoid this.

Judging from the covering letter by the authors I could tell that the issue
regarding a lack of clarity in the methods section was also already raised by the editor. The issues raised by the editor (eg source of the data and rationale of the different data sources) has not been addressed adequately).

Third, in the presentation of the results, clarify what the source of the results is, ie open comments from the survey or the interviews. The dynamics are very different so clearly distinct between the types of data. I would also like to see more distinction between the discourse aspects used by lay people and professionals.

I do not think it is warranted from your data to draw conclusions in the results section about trends in the discourse around death and dying.

How is it possible that you cite a Dutch Law professor in the results section when no Dutch people were included for your interviews (crf methods section). Regarding this passage: the Dutch euthanasia law is 8 pages last time I saw it, not over 90 as indicated in your text.

Fourth, the discussion should much better address what this paper contributes in terms of insights for the social theory regarding discourses around death and dying, more specifically related to controlled dying.

Minor essential revisions:

Introduction
- authors mention that data render support for the hypothesis that truth telling might lead to suicide. This is very careless as it may for instance rather be related to aspects of loss rather than to the terminal diagnosis as such.

Methods
- the manner in which the authors explain how theory works (ie ‘explaining’ and ‘accounting for variation’ sounds a bit complicit with a rather quantitative and hegemonic biomedical perspective)

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 declare that I have no competing interests