Author's response to reviews

Title: Understanding the role of the volunteer in specialist palliative care: a systematic review and thematic analysis of qualitative studies

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dr C Cornacchia  
Executive Editor  
BMC Palliative Care  

21st December 2013  

Dear Dr Cornacchia  

Understanding the role of the volunteer in specialist palliative care: a systematic review and thematic synthesis of qualitative studies  

On behalf of my fellow authors, I am resubmitting a revised manuscript entitled: Understanding the role of the volunteer in specialist palliative care: a systematic review and thematic synthesis of qualitative studies for exclusive consideration for publication as an article in BMC Palliative Care. We thank you for your interest in our research and have revised the paper taking into account the reviewers’ comments. We have retained in track changes how we have revised the manuscript and we list on the following pages how we have addressed each comment.  

I confirm that the manuscript has not been published and is not being considered for publication elsewhere, in whole or in part. All the authors meet the journal’s requirements for authorship as follows, and have read and approved the manuscript:  

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Yours sincerely  

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Reviewers’ comments and our responses

Comment:
Thank you for the opportunity to review this very interesting synthesis of qualitative research focusing on an area which is highly important to the day-to-day functioning of many palliative care facilities and has received little research attention. Whilst I have recommended that there are major compulsory revisions to be made to this paper, I consider that if these are met, this would be an extremely useful addition to the evidence base for palliative care if it were published.

Our response:
Thank you for your very helpful comments. Please see responses to individual comments below.

Comment :
It would be helpful to state in the aim of the synthesis from whose perspective the volunteer role is understood (pg 5).

Our response:
We have amended the text to make this clear.

Comment 3:
Inclusion criteria- you state you included studies that ‘provided qualitative findings on the experience of ‘ It is not clear from your search strategy if you searched for all types of research methods (ie quantitative and qualitative) and would have extracted qualitative data where reported separately, or if you searched purely for qualitative research. If it is the second point – how did you do this? There is no evidence of a filter for qualitative research in your search strategies (which otherwise looked extremely comprehensive).

Our response
We have amended the first sentence in the method section to make it clearer that we included only qualitative studies in this review. We have also amended the description of our search strategy to make it clear that the searches we undertook were for all available literature regardless of research method since the present study was part of a wider project. The inclusion criteria in Table 1 also state that we included only studies with a qualitative research design.

Reviewer comment
With regard to quality assessment, I am interested that you undertook two forms of assessment. It would be helpful to have more rationale provided for this given that appraising the quality of qualitative research remains contentious. It would be helpful to hear what you felt was gained by undertaking two quality assessment processes (this could be included in the section in quality assessment on page 9). Also did you have an apriori cut off for quality? It is fine if you didn’t, but it would be useful for it to be stated either way

Our response
We have amended the quality assessment paragraph in the method to make it clearer why we used two quality assessment tools.

We have also amended the quality assessment paragraph in the findings to explain that we did not define a cut off for quality a priori since there is no agreed standard for this, and because we included
all the studies regardless of quality, preferring to compare their contribution to the analysis. We touch the issues raised by this in the discussion.

Reviewer comment
I very much liked your description of the iterative process for formulating the codes.

Our response
Thank you.

Reviewer comment
It would be helpful to have more detail of the demographics of the participants in the included studies provided in the text. Hospice volunteers are generally an ageing population. They are a group that hospices themselves recognise as being threatened, as people retire later and when they do retire are caught up with other duties such as caring for grandchildren. More detail about the nature of the people included in the studies will provide additional context to the findings. It would also be useful to have an acknowledgement of the changing face of the volunteer workforce in the discussion.

Our response
We have added more details about numbers of participants and their demographics into the relevant section, and also more detail into Additional File 2. As can be seen, the populations in the studies have a wide range of ages. It should also be noted that not all the studies were of volunteers themselves. We also used studies of patients/families and volunteer coordinators as we were interested in how the role is understood by all those involved, and it was interesting to see whether a universal understanding of the role emerged from the data.

We have given the reviewer’s suggestions serious consideration, and on balance, think that the issue of the demographic profile of volunteers, whilst of relevance to the day-to-day issue of recruiting and retaining volunteers and encouraging diversity (see Morris et al, 2012 for an overview), is not relevant to the present study. In none of data from the included studies were issues related to the demographic profile of volunteers mentioned. Also, since several studies do not provide mean ages (and standard deviations), just age ranges, it is difficult to draw sensible conclusions about the relevance of the themes generated in the study to particular age groups, or to the general issue experienced in the UK around recruiting younger volunteers.


Reviewer comment
Also in the included studies section, it would be helpful to have more detail of the types of research methodologies used in the included studies and some discussion about the different types of methodologies that were being synthesised together. There is a column entitled data collection method/analysis in Additional file 2, but there are also details of methodologies supplied here, which is slightly confusing. It may be that the included studies were less than clear on what they did (this would not be uncommon), but some acknowledgement of this, if it was the case, would be informative.

Our response
We have amended the included studies section to include the analysis methods employed. We have also slightly amended Additional file 2 to make the column ‘data collection method/analysis’ clearer, and also added comments about the issue of combining studies whose data were produced with different methods.
Included studies – I wondered about the inclusion of a paper from a developing country when the context of volunteering was so different to the other included studies. I acknowledge that you do mention this, but further discussion around the similarities and differences provided by this paper would be warranted.

Our response
This is an interesting point and we have added a paragraph about this to the discussion.

Reviewer comment
Synthesis findings – it would be helpful to have more transparency around how the codes were developed into sub-themes and then how the sub-themes were developed into the ‘theme clusters’ eg the number of codes contributing to each sub-theme and perhaps an example of a list of codes for one sub-theme. This enables the reader to have a sense of how the synthesis was developed.

Our response
We have added Additional File 8 which gives a sample sub-theme with its constituent codes.

Reviewer comment
Theme clusters – I found the sections for the theme clusters rather descriptive, lacking in critical interpretation and with elements being dealt with rather superficially, or with overlap between sections. You mention later in the paper (pg 24) that you did not code aspects of the text which were ‘off-topic’ eg volunteer motivation. I consider this quite crucial to understanding the volunteer role, as understanding someone’s motivation for the role would help you critically analyse why they see the role in the way they do. Similarly you state on page 22 that you excluded papers that focused on irrelevant topics such as volunteer motivation, stress and burnout, and training – but acknowledge that these topics were brought up by respondents. Revisiting these papers and looking at these aspects in more depth would, I think, help your critical interpretation of the findings arising from the primary studies. I wonder if you could re-write the discussion section using the findings of these excluded papers as a guide to give you additional depth. There are many factors that influence why people volunteer in the first instance and how they manage the role once they volunteer, which don’t currently come out in your synthesis or your discussion, the inclusion of which would significantly add to the overall quality of your paper.

Our response
We have considered this comment in three parts:

1-Theme clusters – we have considered this comment in some depth and feel that the limited material available in the included studies does not allow for a more developed analysis. In particular, we were wary of over-interpreting study findings because of the nature of our review question. We discuss this in the section ‘Thematic synthesis method’.

2 Coding ‘off-topic’ texts – this is a very good point. Our research question focused on how the volunteer role is understood by those with direct experience of it (primarily volunteers and families). We developed inclusion criteria which would include as much relevant material as possible, specifically where findings focused on care given by volunteers in patient/family-facing roles. However, we needed to be realistic about how much material it was practical to include in a synthesis of this type so we used text where the focus was on the care given by volunteers to patients/families. In some of these texts participants mention volunteer motivation etc, but the focus needed to be on care. In this way, we hoped to set inclusion criteria that resulted in a manageable number of papers, which we think we achieved. We have amended the text in the discussion (Methodological Reflections – new section on inclusion criteria) to make this clear. (In addition, we have added further section headings to this part of the discussion to aid readability.)
3-We note the reviewer’s concerns that we do not offer any critical interpretation of our findings based on wider literature and have added links to other literature, including that on motivation, to improve this aspect of the paper.

Reviewer comment
You discuss on page 23 about how the review explores the difference that care setting made to the findings. You do begin to do this in the review, but it would be really helpful if this message was strengthened throughout the paper.

Our response
We were very wary about reading too much into the effect of the setting on our findings, other than the observations we made in the paper. The picture is also somewhat unclear in some of the papers as to what ‘hospice’ refers to and also by some papers involving participants from a range of settings.