Reviewer’s report

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

Version: 1 Date: 19 November 2013

Reviewer: Kate Flemming

Reviewer’s report:

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.

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

2. 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).

3. 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.

4. I very much liked you description of the iterative process for formulating the codes.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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'