Reviewer's report

Title: Towards a standardised approach for evaluating guidelines on Palliative Sedation: Study Protocol

Version: 2
Date: 12 January 2014

Reviewer: Myriam Deveugele

Reviewer's report:

This study protocol deals with important problems on palliative sedation, namely differences in nomenclature, differences in how and when to use palliative sedation, differences in actual use. As palliative sedation is indeed and as the authors state an important and increasing practice, studying the guidelines is absolutely valid.

Major compulsory revisions.

Introduction: although the introduction addresses important problems with palliative sedation literature, the introduction is somewhat chaotic and needs more structure and order. Some examples:

The introduction starts with sedation and defines problems of sedation and sedation until death. In the second paragraph 'palliative sedation' is introduced. Please explain the difference between 'sedation until death' and 'palliative sedation'. As it is written now there seem to be no reason to make a distinction.

Second: the authors state that there are variations in the guidance documents depending on goals and politics. This variation is normal I think, but the authors do not provide scientific reasons to study these differences. They also state that palliative sedation is a growing trend. I absolutely agree, but again please provide why this should be studied. As the authors state that practice guidelines do not necessarily translate into improved patient outcomes, as a reader I would love some examples and explanation.

Third: the research questions are too vague. Examine characteristics and contents of guidelines, what does this mean? I also want to know what the difference will be between this study and other systematic reviews on palliative sedation that are mentioned in the reference list. What will this study add, why is this study needed?

In short, I would love the introduction to be more structured, more problem focused, with clear examples to underline the topic and absolutely proving the necessity to do this study.

Method: more or less the same problem as the introduction, not always understandable described.

Stage 1: the exclusion criteria are better described and more clear than in the inclusion criteria, I would love the opposite. Moreover I do not understand the relevance of the sentence 'this task has been undertaken... literature review and
expert consultations’ why is this put here?

Stage 2: what is a multi-level process of searching literature? the first paragraph of this topic is absolutely not clearly written. Where did the authors searched for existing instruments? How were these identified? The checklist seems very comprehensive.

Stage 3: OK

Stage 4: OK

Stage 5: seems OK but too early to assess

In general the proposed method seems sound. What I especially appreciate is the inclusion of grey literature.

Discussion OK

General comment: this method seems very thoughtful and correct. I have no comments on the content. My most important comment is the readability. To make this important method useful for other researchers the article must be very clear and good structured. Succes!

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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