Reviewer's report

Title: Corticosteroid prescribing in palliative care settings: a retrospective analysis in New Zealand

Version: 3  Date: 11 December 2013

Reviewer: Richella Ryan

Reviewer's report:

I am happy that the authors have addressed all of the major compulsory and minor essential revisions requested by the reviewers. It is clear that the authors have made a very earnest revision of the paper. The result is a significantly improved paper. The methodology is now much clearer, which was a major weakness in the original submission. More data is presented, such that it is easier to contextualise and interpret. There remain quite a few minor essential revisions that I feel are necessary before the paper goes to publication. These mainly relate to the writing style, terminology and table presentation.

Minor essential revisions:

1) Abstract:
- Line 2: please remove the term 'adjuvant drugs' as steroids are not only used as adjuvants.
- Line 22: please remove 'the evidence base for most prescribing was not apparent'. It is not clear what this means.

2) Background:
- Page 4 Line 1: would suggest 'considered to be' rather than 'considered as'
- Page 4 Line 2-3: please remove 'adjuvant analgesics' because steroids are not just adjuvant analgesics
- Page 4 Line 10: would remove 'though inconclusive'- this does not make sense in the context of the entire sentence
- Page 4 Line 22: would use the term 'anorexia-cachexia' rather than 'cachexia-anorexia'
- Page 6 Line 7-8: this statement is not clearly written. Would suggest 'and may be wrongly assumed to be part of the dying process' rather than 'but may be...'
- Page 6 Line 17-19: would suggest removing this sentence entirely as it is opinion and advice rather than fact, with no evidence to support it. It is, therefore, inappropriate for the background section.

3) Methods:
- Page 7 Line 3: would remove 'and the management of corticosteroid usage'- this is unnecessary and complicates the syntax
Page 8 Line 10: The sentence 'there were 769 patients...' should be broken into at least 2 sentences as it does not read easily.

4) Results:
- Please report standard deviations for all means presented, as well as interquartile ranges for all medians presented, as would be standard reporting practice. Usually, these are presented in brackets after presenting the mean or median.
- Please make it clear when you present ranges as to whether the range is the maximum and minimum value for a particular variable in the total population or whether you are describing the variation in the mean/median/percentage across the hospices. For example, in relation to adverse event reporting, you should state that the proportion ranged from 15% to 45% across the 6 hospices. For clarity, in general, I would suggest you always present the mean/median/percentage for the total population first and then describe the variation across the individual hospices.

5) Discussion:
- Page 13 Line 5: would remove 'and the large sample size adding further weight to those findings' as this appears out of place within this sentence
- Page 13 Line 21: typo. Please insert 'to be considered'. I would also suggest 'to be interpreted' instead of 'to be considered' but this is non-essential.
- Page 14 Line 7: 'dose ranges for the common indications were similar'. While you state that the medians were similar in the results section, you do not refer to dose ranges. New information should not be introduced in the discussion. Therefore, I would suggest stating that the 'median' dose was similar across hospices rather than the dose ranges.
- Page 14: Line 11-13: would suggest removing this sentence as it does not add anything and is unclear.

6) Tables:
- Table 4 needs revision. I would suggest the following:
  1) I would eliminate the third column (number not prescribed corticosteroids) as this is obvious and detracts from the main purpose of the table
  2) I would suggest only presenting the percentage for the second column (number of corticosteroids prescribed) and providing the percentage for the row rather than the column. For example, I would suggest that the first row should read: 204 patients were prescribed corticosteroids which represented 67% of the total sample for hospice 1. This allows us to see, at a glance, the individual frequencies/percentages for each hospice rather than seeing the proportion that each hospice contributes to the total percentage, which is less interesting.
- Table 5: It is usual practice to present mean age with standard deviation rather than range. I would suggest you do this.
- Table 7 & 8: I would suggest you present the interquartile range in brackets for
all medians presented e.g.: median (IQR) e.g. 4mg (...).

Discretionary revisions:

1) Methods:
- Page 9 Line 21-23: Please consider whether this sentence is necessary. As far as I can see you have not presented any confidence intervals in relation to dosing (only indications).

2) Discussion:
- The second paragraph of the discussion appears to repeat what has already been presented in the methods section. This appears to be unnecessary and appears to be out of place. Whilst the discussion section should summarise the main findings, it should not summarise the methodology. I would suggest removing this entire paragraph.
- Page 13 Line 16: please insert references after 'consistent with previous literature'.
- Page 14 Line 1: I would suggest 'this finding is supported by' rather than 'this finding was supported by'
- Page 15 Line 22-23: I would suggest removing 'and are confident that any differences are attributable to individual prescribing practices'. I think it is impossible to be fully confident about the findings of a retrospective study. I would suggest you clearly emphasise the limitations rather than justify them and simply state how you have minimised them.
- Page 15-16 paragraphs 3 and 4 (limitations): Overall, there is some repetition here. Essentially, you are simply describing the typical limitations of a retrospective design here. I would suggest re-reading these paragraphs and making them clearer, removing any repetitive statements. For example, you do not need to state again 'lastly, this was a retrospective assessment' as this is what you have you have been discussing in the preceding sentences. Perhaps you could start a new paragraph at this point stating 'Given the above described limitations of a retrospective design, it would be useful to conduct a prospective study....'

3) Tables:
I would suggest you remove the percentage columns from tables 6, 9 and 10 and place the percentage in brackets after the number, as you have done in other tables, for consistency and clarity.

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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