Author's response to reviews

Title: A systematic review of psychosocial interventions for family carers of palliative care patients

Authors:

   Peter L Hudson (peterh@medstv.unimelb.edu.au)
   Cheryl Remedios (cheryl.remedios@svhm.org.au)
   Kristina Thomas (tina.griffin@hotmail.com)

Version: 2 Date: 27 April 2010

Author's response to reviews: see over
27 April 2010

Miss Nafisa Qazi
The BioMed Central Editorial Team

Dear Miss Qazi

Re: MS: 1086809723319261
A systematic review of psychosocial interventions for family carers of palliative care patients. Authors: Peter L Hudson, Kristina Thomas and Cheryl Remedios

Thank you for your email of 27 March 2010..

Reviewer: Ann-Louise Caress
Reviewer's comments requiring response:

1. The authors have included qualitative studies, which seems anomalous in a study focusing on interventions. This needs robust justification.

Response: We agree that the typical approach to examining interventions focuses on quantitative methods. However, the purpose of our review is to report on the evolution of a very young field of inquiry: we believe that the field will benefit from being aware of published interventions even if they are only in the early stages of development (for example pre-pilot RCT stage). The importance of piloting interventions (to test processes, incorporating qualitative methods) for complex interventions (such as those used for family caregivers) is becoming increasingly evident (e.g. Craig et al BMJ 2008:337). We also deliberately used the same evaluation framework that was utilised for the baseline review from a decade ago which also reported on qualitative evaluation of interventions. We have amended the manuscript incorporating the aforementioned response to justify why qualitative studies were included as we concur with the reviewer that being more explicit about this approach is warranted.

2. Some of the papers included focus on symptom control. It is not readily apparent how this can be defined as a psychosocial intervention - this needs to be justified and/or the 'psychosocial' element of the intervention better identified. Related to this, there seems to be some mixing of focus ie in some included studies, the intervention itself focuses on psychosocial aspects, whilst in others the authors' focus seems to be on psychosocial outcomes, with the intervention not being clearly identifiable as a 'psychosocial intervention'.

Response: We agree, this requires clarification and have done so where pertinent. We have amended Table 2 so that it now explicitly acknowledges ‘carer’ outcome variables and reviewed all relevant papers, however, in some instances we are limited by the information provided in the primary sources. We have removed one of the studies which did focus specifically on patient symptom outcomes. However, a couple of interventions were multi component and incorporated patient symptoms as well as carer psychosocial domains and the two aspects are related. For example, Keefe et al intervention improved family carers’ self-efficacy (a psychological construct) for managing patient symptoms. Typically, carers feel less psychosocial burden when
they can reduce their relative’s symptoms and we have included this notion in the amended manuscript.

3. There is considerable reiteration of results in the discussion. This needs to be reduced. The paper would benefit from a sentence or two highlighting whether any approaches/intervention components were commonly identified across the studies, or not and whether it was possible to determine whether these were consistently positively evaluated or not.

**Response:** We agree, and we have amended the discussion section accordingly.

4. The sample column of the summary table does not always indicate who the sample actually were (ie in several places the number of participants/drop-outs is provided, but not the clinical focus/diagnostic group of the cared for). This needs amendment

**Response:** We agree, and we have amended this section accordingly.

**Reviewer: Priscilla Koop**

**Reviewer’s comments requiring response:**

1. The last three paragraphs of the discussion section are incomplete. While they discuss important points made by other authors, the authors of this paper have not adequately related those points to the current review of the literature.

**Response:** We agree, and we have amended the discussion section accordingly.

2. Results section, 1st paragraph, 5th line, should read "carers of palliative care patients".

**Response:** Amended as requested.

3. Results section, 3rd paragraph, Re: "lower reports of symptom distress". Do you mean "reports of lower symptom distress"?

**Response:** Amended as requested.

Please also note there is a change to the authorship order. Please move Dr Remedios to second author (rather than third).

I hope that our responses to the reviewers’ recommendations (below) are satisfactory and I look forward to your feedback.

Yours sincerely

Assoc Prof Peter Hudson