Reviewer's report

Title: Time to Decide: Risk-Reducing Mastectomy and BRCA1/2 Gene Mutation Carriers

Version: 1 Date: 23 November 2006

Reviewer: Nina Hallowell

Reviewer's report:

General
This is an interesting paper which looks at the decision-making about prophylactic mastectomy because of a family history of cancer. This type of risk-reducing surgery raises many issues for high risk women and the authors demonstrate the difficulties women face when charged with making this decision. My main issue with the paper is that it is overly descriptive and misses the opportunity to add some flesh on the theoretical debates in this area. The paper is beautifully written and makes some interesting policy related points about providing support to women in the longer term.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

I would have liked to see more primary data in the paper. At the moment it reports three descriptive case studies which are based upon open-ended responses to questions in telephone interviews (I assume, see below). Although the case studies are very interesting in themselves, I would have liked to have heard what the women said about their decisions. Indeed, it is not very clear what data the case studies are based on either the forced choice questionnaire responses or open-ended responses in interviews.

I would have liked to have seen some discussion about the counsellors/health care professionals' need to promote autonomous decision-making about surgery in this instance and the women's potential feelings about needing guidance and support. Why are HCPs backing off here, should they behave like this when they are more than happy to give advice in other areas of medicine? In an old study of genetic counselling for HBOC I observed that HCPs do talk about proph mastectomy very differently compared to other types of risk management. Hallowell N (1999) Advising on the management of genetic risk: offering choice or prescribing action? Health, Risk and Society 1:267-280

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

P15ff In supporting their comments about cultural differences the authors might like to refer to reference to Kathy Davis' work on plastic surgery in the Netherlands. I Reshaping the Female Body. New York:Routledge, 1995.

There is also published work undertaken by Julien Reynier et al which compares attitudes to Proph surgery in Quebec and France.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No
Declaration of competing interests:

'I declare that I have no competing interests'