Reviewer’s report

Title: Association of Health Literacy with Complementary and Alternative medicine use: A Cross-sectional study in Adult Primary Care Patients

Version: 1 Date: 14 September 2011

Reviewer: Chi Wai Lui

Reviewer’s report:

This manuscript reports the findings of a cross-sectional survey that examined the association of health literacy and CAM use among a group of patients from a clinic in South Carolina. The study addresses an area in CAM use research, which is important but currently under-researched. The findings and discussion of this paper will be of interest to the BMC CAM readership.

Overall, this is a clearly written and well-structured manuscript. I believe the paper is probably publishable with some revisions needed. This is especially the case in the section of Discussion, which is under-developed in its current form.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. What is missing in this paper is an elaboration on the significance of the issue being studied. I agree with the authors that the relationship between health literacy and CAM use is an important area overlooked. However, I am disappointed that the authors failed to: (a) explain why this issue is important in the Background section; and (b) evaluate this issue and its implications in the Discussion in light of the findings of the study.

In the Background section, the authors stated that ‘To our knowledge, few studies have assessed the relationship between health literacy and CAM use by racial categories’ (p.4). While this observation may be correct, the lack of study/knowledge alone is not a proper reason for conducting a research in this issue. The authors need to explain why an understanding of this relationship between health literacy and CAM use is important.

The Discussion in its present form is largely a summary of the Results section all over again. What is needed in this section is a critical examination of the issue in terms of the findings. In particular, I will like to know the implications of the study, say in terms of health promotion, health education, or our understanding of health seeking/decision-making of CAM users, etc.

2. One of the findings of this study is that health literacy status differed by CAM use category, e.g. 14% meditation users had adequate health literacy compared to 61% of vitamin users. What is the possible explanation and implication of this interesting finding?

Minor Essential Revisions
3. Background section, p.4, second paragraph: ‘Higher CAM has also been associated with health behavior and outcomes such as lower adherence ….’
COMMENT: Meaning unclear; lower adherence to what?

4. P.6, second line: ‘… was categorized as better/same and worse’ should be ‘… was categorized as better, same and worse’.

5. Discussion section, p.11, first paragraph: ‘Although national estimates indicate that whites are more likely use CAM than African Americans, many national surveys lack measures of health literacy’.
COMMENT: I cannot see the point here.

6. Discussion section, p.11, first paragraph: ‘… although higher educational attainment has been associated with increased CAM use, years of schooling may not necessarily predict reading ability’.
COMMENT: I cannot see the point here.

7. Discussion section, p.11, second paragraph: ‘It is also possible that patients in an academic center were more likely to use CAM secondary to medical complexity’.
COMMENT: I cannot see the reason behind this explanation. Further elaboration is needed.

8. Discussion section, p.11, second paragraph: ‘… our measure of health literacy, the REALM-R, does not measure reading comprehension or numeracy. However, despite these unmeasured these skills, our analysis did reveal the REALM-R to be a valid and reliable measure.’
COMMENT: What is the possible limitation for not measuring comprehension or numeracy in relation to a study on CAM use? This needs further elaboration. The sentence ‘… despite these unmeasured these skills’ also needs to be revised.

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

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

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.