Author's response to reviews

Title: Prevalence and factors associated with the use of alternative (folk) medicine practitioners in 8 countries of the former Soviet Union

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Version: 5 Date: 6 March 2013

Author's response to reviews:

Dear Editorial Office,

Please find our response to the Associate Editor's and reviewers' comments below.

Thank you for considering this manuscript for publication.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Stickley.

Associate Editor's Comments and Our Response

Associate Editor comments:

Thank you for your revision of this paper. The additional information you have provided have strengthened and clarified the paper. The re-reviews are now complete and attached for your information. As you will see, there is still one major outstanding issue noted in current and past reviews. Specifically, a single question is used to assess CAM: ‘Go to a person practicing non-traditional (folk) medicine.’ The authors provide one citation (Iarskaia-Simirnova and Romanov, 2008) to support the use of this question as a measure of CAM use. However, the article by Iarskaia-Simirnova and Romanov (2008) actually suggests that the use of the term ‘non-traditional medicine (folk healers)’ is suboptimal and highlight a better worded question used in a survey of St. Petersburg:

‘Survey data from 1,500 respondents in 44 Russian regions confirm the demand for CAM services: in 2002 every fourth Russian citizen consulted CAM specialists, although only nine percent said they trusted them more than those practicing orthodox medicine (Fund of Public Opinion, 2002). However, the wording of the question in this survey may have heavily shaped the responses:
‘Have you or have you not appealed to the services of non-traditional medicine (folk healers, herbalists [travnik], psychics, etc.)’ The illustrations given of the category ‘non-traditional medicine’ represent the most contested areas and less scientific and rational forms of ‘non-traditional medicine’. Moreover, the word travnik was used to define a herbalist instead of ‘fitoterapevt’. Consequently, the list of practitioners is exclusively associated with backwardness and irrationality and may well have skewed the answers. Interestingly, this report is published on the Fund of Public Opinion website under the rubric of ‘mysticism’.

A broader range of ‘non-traditional medicine’ and less stereotyped categories was used in another survey of 1,004 respondents in St Petersburg (Goryunov and Khlopushin, 2005). This survey revealed an overall higher demand for CAM services, which were defined as ‘manual therapy, herbal treatment, acupuncture, bioenergetics and natural healing methods’.

Based on Iarskaia-Simirnova and Romanov (2008), the Associate Editor has to agree with the reviewers (from both rounds) that it is inappropriate to present the current data as representing CAM, and as, such, the manuscript is not acceptable for publication in its present version. The title should be rewritten along the lines of: ‘Prevalence and factors associated with the use of folk medicine practitioners in 8 counties of the former Soviet Union.’ Also, the Abstract, Background, Methods, Discussion, Conclusions, and Tables must all make clear that only one aspect of CAM, folk medicine provided by practitioners, is being assessed.

Our Response

We would like to thank the Associate Editor for his/her hard work and thoughtfulness that has gone into this review. However, we feel that there is a need to reach a consensus on this terminology.

We would like to first explain our views regarding this terminology. There is a specific word for practitioners of folk medicine (i.e. ######## ######## – folk/traditional healers) which is not mentioned in the question. In the paper we gave a direct translation of the Russian word ‘netraditsionnaya’ as ‘non-traditional’. However, this direct translation was a mistake on our part as the word can also be interpreted as ‘unconventional’ and also as ‘alternative’ in English.

Indeed, in the English version of the LLH survey questionnaire the actual question answer option that was used was ‘Go to an alternative healer’. This was the template answer option that was then translated into Russian and other country languages before the survey was carried out.

Since the request for the change was made by the Associate Editor, I have contacted several Russian colleagues to inquire about their interpretation of this question answer option and they all responded that for them it suggests potentially more than just folk medicine practitioners. However, we do agree that the use of the word ‘folk’ in parentheses in the question answer option is
confusing and may have led some respondents to interpret the question as referring solely to practitioners of folk medicine. Nonetheless, our question was different from Iarskaia-Simirnova and Romanov’s in the sense that we did not list a range of practitioners and just intended to give ‘folk’ medicine as one example of alternative medicine – which is why the word was placed in parentheses and it was the only example given.

To try and give what we feel is an accurate interpretation of this term we have followed the suggestion of Reviewer 2 who stated that a direct translation of the question answer option should be used throughout the text. However, we have now replaced the word ‘non-traditional’ with the word ‘alternative’, so that we now refer to practitioners of ‘alternative (folk) medicine’. We have also added some discussion to the limitations where we explain about this problem and our use of the terminology in the text.

Reviewer’s report

Title: Prevalence and factors associated with the use of complementary and alternative medicine practitioners in 8 countries of the former Soviet Union

Version: 4 Date: 27 January 2013

Reviewer: Samuel M Brown

Reviewer’s report:

My concern is that the authors have not demonstrated that their instrument answers the question it is reported to answer in the manuscript under review. In Russian, at least, "traditsionnaya meditsina" can mean various things, including both conventional biomedicine and folk medicine depending on the context. I would need to see the Russian instrument to be able to comment in greater detail, but my paper some years back documents just how widespread are CAM therapies that would not be identified with the type of questions implied by the account in their paper.

I suspect that similar problems are also present in the non-Russian-speaking sample.

Our Response:

We agree with the reviewer that there is potential for confusion with this question. We have thus used the answer option in full throughout the text as suggested by another reviewer and now discuss this issue in the limitations sections so that readers will be aware of this potentially problematic issue.

Reviewer's report
Title: Prevalence and factors associated with the use of complementary and alternative medicine practitioners in 8 countries of the former Soviet Union

Version: 4 Date: 3 January 2013

Reviewer: Barbara Stussman

Reviewer's report:

Minor Essential Revision:

1. Since the LLH survey question asked respondents about going to "a person practicing non-traditional (folk) medicine," this phrasing should be used throughout the article, including in the title, rather than "CAM practitioner." To many researchers "CAM practitioner" includes a wide array of practitioners that were likely not included in the definition used in the LLH.

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.

Our Response:

We thank the reviewer for this suggestion. In accordance with it we have now used the question answer option throughout the text – although we have changed the term 'non-traditional' to 'alternative' as this was word that was used in the English language version of the LLH survey.

Reviewer's report

Title: Prevalence and factors associated with the use of complementary and alternative medicine practitioners in 8 countries of the former Soviet Union

Version: 4 Date: 14 January 2013

Reviewer: Brian P Hinote

Reviewer's report:

Second Peer Review for BMC Complementary & Alternative Medicine

"Prevalence and factors associated with the use of complementary and alternative medicine practitioners in 8 countries of the former Soviet Union"
14 January 2013

Brian P. Hinote, PhD

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
Research question is well-defined.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
Yes.

3. Are the data sound?
Data are indeed sound. I am quite familiar with these data, and the LLH set is a strong, valid, and reliable one.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
Overall, yes.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
Overall, yes.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
Yes.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
Yes.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Title and abstract are both informative and appropriate to findings.

9. Is the writing acceptable?
Overall the writing is acceptable.

- Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)
  Suggested changes addressed.

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

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

None.

Publish? Y/N

I recommend publication of this manuscript.

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:

No competing

Our Response:

No response required.