Reviewer's report

Title:A Randomised Multicentre Trial of Acupuncture in Patients with Seasonal Allergic Rhinitis - Study Intervention including Physician and Treatment Characteristics

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Reviewer:George Lewith

Reviewer's report:

The abstract really needs tightening and editing.

Don't introduce ACUSAR as an acronym without explaining what it stands for. Presumably the aim of the paper would describe the study physicians and intervention in order to understand if they made a difference to the outcome; that is not clear in the abstract. The specific question that needs to be asked and answered by this paper remains a little vague. Some of the English in the method section needs attention; I don't understand what a facultative acupuncture point is? I've never seen it referred to in any of the acupuncture literature I've read.

The results report TCM diagnosis: the abstract in its background does not suggest that we will be looking for a diagnosis but rather will be looking at the study physicians and intervention (are the diagnosis and intervention synonymous? If so, that needs to be made clear).

The conclusions are rather weak, if one recruited well educated and experienced acupuncturists, which this trial did, then it’s rather facile to come to the conclusion that the acupuncture was provided by well educated and experienced acupuncturists. The use of more needles in the acupuncture group result in a better outcome. The abstract seems a little cloudy and needs tightening up; the authors should be aware that very often the abstract is the only information that’s read by people. The introduction and methods are largely drawn from the primary paper and again the question posed in the last sentence of the introductory section (the aim of this paper is to provide details on the characteristics of the intervention and the acupuncturists who participated) is a little and one wonders why one would want to know that.

I suspect the method section is rather repetitive of the main paper; do we really need to know that? There appears to be no statistical methodology for the proposed analysis in the method section and it seems from the method section that it’s rather unclear as to exactly what scientific questions this paper will be answering, as opposed to the initial protocol and subsequent Annals paper.

There are a large number of tables and I’m sure some of these could be thoughtfully combined. I would imagine that an acupuncturist might wish to know some of the following questions:

Are there particular TCM diagnostic categories which respond to acupuncture and others that do not?
Does the quality of de qi (however that was measured) influence outcome? We’re not told in the methods section how de qi was measured.

Can we ascertain (is the trial adequately powered) to suggest that there are any specific characteristics (number of needles, length of session, etc) which could be predictive of treatment outcome.

In the discussion section the authors report the conclusion of the large previously published paper. The authors suggest that the consensus-based approach was a very effective way of running this trial but I’m not sure how they arrived at that conclusion; did they have focus groups and did they discuss this with the acupuncturists involved after the trial? The authors make a point that a TCM diagnosis was a great strength of their trial but they don’t really tell us how they used it or how we should handle that in terms of outcome. Should acupuncturists be learning a TCM diagnosis and is it of any real clinical value? They conclude that the study represented an acceptable compromise between acupuncture treatment and “the rules” of Chinese medicine. If that’s the conclusion, what evidence is it based on?

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.