Reviewer's report

Title: What is Traditional Acupuncture? Exploring goals and processes of treatment in the Context of Women with Early Breast Cancer

Version: 4  Date: 27 March 2014

Reviewer: Charlotte Paterson

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for asking me to review this paper – the authors have done an excellent rewrite and have produced a well structured paper that includes a very thorough and interesting review of the literature, a good description of methods, well laid out and interesting results and a clear and important conclusion. My only general criticism is that the results section is thin on primary data. I think it would be a much stronger argument if the authors could add in some more illustrative quotes or diary/log entries to support the main findings. This could be done within a box or two if they wish to avoid changing the flow of the text.

Apart from that I have only a few suggestions for improvements and very much look forward to seeing this paper in print.

Minor essential revisions
1. Page 6. Methods. Add in who carried out the interviews and their professional background – it is obviously important that SP is an acupuncture practitioner herself.

Discretionary revisions
"It is worth noting that a fundamental concept in TCM or TA is Qi; there is no equivalent concept in western culture."

May help the acupuncture naive reader to add something like ‘it is often translated as ‘energy’

2. Page 5. "One of the core long-term practitioner goals was to bring about change in behaviour using the explanatory model of TA in addressing imbalances in the Qi via the diagnosis and treatment processes"

This sentence not quite work for me – maybe replace ‘in addressing imbalances’ by ‘to address imbalances’?

"To further explore what TA practitioners aim to achieve and how they follow this through in their practice."

I think this could be improved by making it a bit more specific. Something, perhaps, that includes the fact that you are using mixed qualitative methods
(interviews, diaries, logs etc), that you are focused on the detail of this process, that you use a study population of women with breast cancer under treatment rather than people with chronic illness. I appreciate you don’t want it too long though!

The description of the type of interview process should be clarified. Perhaps something like:
Interviews started with an open (rather than ‘simple’) question, for instance, the first interview: “please tell me how you discovered you had breast cancer” and continued in a conversational form, led largely by the patients' responses. An interview guide was used to ensure that all areas were covered by the end of the interview.

5. Page 7
"Practitioners' Intended Outcomes
Uncovering what the practitioners were trying to achieve is an important step in backwards mapping the processes that facilitate perceived or desired change. From this data… "

What data?

6. Page 10
"Helen reflects on how Lena presents according to her differential diagnosis at the first treatment (and prior to chemotherapy starting) and ponders on what impact the chemotherapy might have on her: “Vigilance on 1) already v. yin xu – chemo may burn yin easily – current hot flushes could worse/ stomach may become yin xu…”

I don’t think this entry would be understood by most readers – it needs explanation. Maybe put the diary entry first and then explain what it means in lay terms.

7. Page 11
"Disclosure and reflections with new insight were process-outcomes for the practitioners and fed into new information and new treatment."

If you have a quote from any data source to illustrate this it would be good – it is an important point which would be stronger if backed up by some evidence

"What the outturn of this process has already been reported [22]. "

This doesn’t work as a sentence.

I think this can be strengthened.
The first sentence is good. Then it says: "This suggests that, where the outcome is complex, it may be difficult to conduct an explanatory model of research without considerable compromise to model validity, and estimates of effect size, especially where the ways in which change might be brought about are not made explicit, are unclear or unknown."

I am not sure about the second part of this sentence, after 'model validity' quite what it is saying. Maybe instead it would be good to re-iterate something about the relationship and disclosure, such as:

‘In addition, a good therapeutic relationship was not simply something that was valued by patients but was explicitly used by practitioners to aid disclosure which in turn affected details of treatment: the therapeutic relationship was therefore a vital and integral part of the treatment process.’

In my opinion this is a key finding and very relevant for research design.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests'