Reviewer's report

Title: Complementary and Alternative Medical Therapies for Chronic Low Back Pain: What Treatments are Patients Willing to Try?

Version: 1 Date: 6 May 2004

Reviewer: Kathryn Refshauge

Reviewer's report:

General
The authors have investigated an interesting topic: the willingness of primary care back pain patients to try selected complementary and alternative therapies. They also investigated willingness of these patients to enter a hypothetical trial on complementary and alternative therapies, a less interesting topic. The title clearly and appropriately reflects the first topic but not the second.

The first question has been investigated previously, to some extent, but not specifically for LBP in northern America. The findings for this question are very interesting, and should be very interesting to the readership. The second question, a fairly trivial question in my opinion, is probably new.

Aspects of the methods require further information, for example how were patients selected for the study. The randomization procedure has not been mentioned.

The study looks very much like a “fishing expedition” with far too many analyses, particularly since the response rate was so low. It is very likely that bias would exist, reducing the credibility of the findings.

Finally, reports of what people say they are willing to try, rarely translate directly to behaviour.

In parts the paper is well-written, but in other parts, the paper is not written with great clarity, resulting in difficulty with following the methods and the logic of the authors’ argument.

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

Methods
1. The low response rate needs to be addressed. This is a serious problem in studies such as this. The response rate does not become acceptable by considering whether non-responders would have been eligible or ineligible.

2. The randomization process needs to be elaborated.

3. Statistical analyses: 30 logistic regressions are far too many for this data set. Prior to analysis, the authors should determine the variables of most interest, related to the number of participants recruited. It is not statistically valid to conduct a regression for so many different characteristics.

4. It is particularly concerning that a further 22 variables were considered for the 2nd question.

5. It is unclear what question the odds ratio is expected to answer.
6. The questions were forced choice, not allowing for a preference for none of the therapies, perhaps giving a falsely high response to all categories.

Abstract
1. Response rate should be included in the abstract.

Methods
2. Study Design, p5 of 30: How was mechanical low back pain determined?
3. Table 1: It is unclear what the cross denotes. Please explain the table.

Results
4. The odds ratios are all low, and therefore not very helpful. This point is not made. I believe that this part of the paper should be decreased in length and amount of analysis.

Discussion
5. The part of the discussion related to Implications for Clinical Trials should be reduced in importance and length.

Discussion
3. P15, final paragraph: It is possible to determine the effects of patient expectations and preference. These can be measured and accounted for in the statistical analysis.

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

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: No

Declaration of competing interests:
None