Reviewer's report

Title: Measuring changes in self-concept: a literature review and qualitative evaluation of outcome questionnaires in people having acupuncture for their chronic health problems.

Version: 1 Date: 29 August 2005

Reviewer: Stewart Mercer

Reviewer's report:

General
This is an interesting piece of work in an extremely important area, the implications of which go far beyond the field of acupuncture. It could make a very useful contribution to the literature, but requires modification.

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

1. My main concern with this paper is the use of the PEI as an outcome measure over time, and the very limited regard that is paid to this in theoretical terms in the paper. The PEI is a tool that has been developed and validated as an immediate measure of consultation quality in general practice in conventional primary care in the UK. The author indicates that it has been used in other settings (homoeopathy and acupuncture) but does not adequately explain the background of the measure, nor the lack of validation in these other settings. It is quoted it as a 'retrospective assessment' tool (p7) but it has not been validated nor developed for that purpose by its originators (Howie eta al). Its validated use is as an immediate assessment of the consultation, completed as soon as the consultation ends. To use it as a more distant outcome measure (over weeks and months) requires a much more detailed explanation of why it is being used in this way, and a clearer statement that this is not its validated purpose. The discussion should include a debate on the strengths and limitations of using a tool like this as a 'transition measure', and views that are widely held about the inaccuracy of measuring change retrospectively (see Streiner and Norman, Health Measurement Scales.OUP 2003,ISBN 0 19 85 2847 7 (Pbk)).The use of a single qualitative interview to assess change retrospectively raises similar questions.

2. I am not sure if the layout of the paper is mixed up, but the version I have reviewed has the methods section (p13) after the discussion section. This is very confusing when reading the paper and the methods should be put after background and before results.

3. The author suggests renaming the PEI as the PEI-ac. I think this is inappropriate, as the tool (however used) is generic and not specific to any one therapy or setting. I think this would also be rather unfair to the originators of the tool, who spent many years developing and validating it (unless they have given consent for this to happen). It has also recently been used in a similar way in homoeopathy, where the novel (and unproven) use of it as an outcome has been discussed and this paper is due for publication in the next few days (Bikker, Mercer, Reilly 2005, Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicines, August edition,copy available from myself).

4. The participants details (p 7) would be better presented I feel as a table. The scores of the three instruments (baseline and follow up for the AIOS and WBQ12)could usefully be included, or given as a seperate table. There is no information as far as I can see on ethnicity or socio-economic status of participants nor of acupuncturists. If this is correct, the reasons why these data have not been collected should be stated, otherwise they should be included.
5. The results give examples of change in self-concept (Fig 2). It would be helpful to also see the change scores (AIOS, WBQ12) and the PEI scores for these individual examples.

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

1. It would be really helpful to have all the instruments included as an appendix.
2. Reference is made to interviews with acupuncturists, but I was not able to find any results on this.
3. The discussion refers to the literature review as 'systematic' yet the details of the actual search terms used etc are limited. If this is being published as a systematic review, it requires more detail on the search strategies used.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

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

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

Non-financial competing interest; I have carried out similar research on the PEI as a potential outcome measure, which is in press and due to be published this month (Bikker AP, Mercer SW, Reilly D. A pilot prospective study of the consultation and relational empathy, patient enablement, and health changes over 12 months, in patients attending the Glasgow Homoeopathic Hospital. J Alt. Comp. Med. 2005, 11 (4) (In press, August edition)