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: 14 September 2005

Reviewer: Hugh MacPherson

Reviewer's report:

Minor essential revisions (that the author can be trusted to make)

This is an interesting paper which tackles the difficult area of measuring change in self-concept in people receiving a complex intervention for a chronic condition.

However the paper is weakened by a number of presentational problems and insufficient support for her arguments in several places.

Major points:

Extraordinarily, the Methods section is placed after the conclusions, which is confusing for the reader, as much information here is needed to interpret the previous Results section. This may be an unintentional error.

An ongoing confusion for the reader is whether two or three questionnaires are being explored, see pages 2 (2 questionnaires), page 4 (both 2 and 3), page 11 (2), page 12 (3 and 2), etc. Consistency is needed throughout. Given that three are evaluated, suggest this is the number to use.

Did the study have NHS approval? If yes, the actual LREC committee should be specified. If not who provided approval, the University of Bristol? Full details of approvals are necessary here. (Page 14).

Minor points:

On page 4, “This paper” reads ambiguously as it is not clear if this refers to the previous cited paper, or the new research about to be reported.

There is also some confusion with regard to the labelling of Figures and Tables, for example page 8, Fig 1 should be Fig 2, and Fig 2 should be Table 1, and there are others which also need correcting.

The inclusion criteria for the literature review are mentioned in the results (page 6) but are not clearly identified as such in the Methods (page 13/14).

The “different populations” is mentioned as an issue in the Results (page 6) but there is no identification or definition of the target population the Methods.

The assessment of validity and reliability of the various scales is given scant coverage. (page 14)

How were the sensitivity and specificity calculated for the three questionnaires? More detail would be useful here. (Methods)
Also data on the quantitative tests for correlation would enhance this paper. (Results)

The word “systematic” (Page 13) is used for the literature review, yet it appears that this review was an ongoing process as search terms were “refined” as searches continued (page 13 and Fig 1). As this review did not follow current systematic review practice, as it did not have a fixed protocol, perhaps the word systematic requires some qualification.

Could the reason for the questionnaires being more of less suitable for repeated administration be made clearer (page 12)?

Likewise the case for using two scales together (PEI-ac and W-BQ12) is not made sufficiently cogently on page 12: in what way are they complementary, how do the two together better capture “self-concept”?

What is the implication of the change from the PEI wording (based on how you feel “today”) to the PEI-ac (“over the last few weeks”) (page 14)? How will the patient data be different, does this have implications for comparisons with other data from other patient populations.

The author finds that she can code data into “unambiguous” categories, however often patient interview data can be coded in more that one category, and it is surprising that no data was ambiguous.

The contribution of the acupuncture interviews to the results is limited. Perhaps this could be more clearly identified.

In Table 1, it would be helpful if it was more clearly stated in the headings to the two right hand columns that it is the interview data that is being compared to the questionnaire data, perhaps by adding “from interviews” after “self-concept”.

Despite these concerns, the paper does make a very useful contribution to the field, providing valuable data for others with a similar research interest to build on.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare have no competing interests