Reviewer’s report

Title: Bach Flower Remedies for psychological problems and pain: a systematic review

Version: 1 Date: 2 February 2009

Reviewer: Arndt Büssing

Reviewer’s report:

The systematic review of Thaler et al entitled “Bach Flower Remedies for psychological problems and pain: a systematic review” included prospective studies with a control group for efficacy analysis, and also retrospective, observational studies for safety analyses. The authors identified 5 RCTs and 2 other studies. They found no overall benefit for the Bach Flowers over placebo; moreover, as they cited “We conclude that BFRs are probably safe but not more efficacious than a placebo intervention for examination anxiety, anxiety, ADHD, stress, or pain.”

I am not really surprised that the Bach Flower Remedies are not more effective as compared to placebos, indicating unspecific effects in terms of high patients’ expectations – and thus may be ‘unspecifically (in-)effective’ particularly in cases of psychological problems and stress.

Taken together, the review provides useful information which are worth to be published.

Some details:

o Beyond the description of “studies with a fatal flaw in one or more categories” described, are there hints of a publication bias (excluding negative rather than indifferent results?)

o Page 8: Please describe shortly the methodological limitations of the mentioned 3 studies.

o Page 9: The fact that BFRs reduced anxiety in the subgroup of students who demonstrated high levels of anxiety at the first measurement might not only be due to the suggested multiple testing, but could simple be a ‘regression to the mean’ effect.

o Page 11: Although I understand why you have excluded the study using the Yarrow Special Formula, which contains non-Bach flower essences, it would be interesting to sum up the results in contrast to the conventional BFR.

o It is less satisfying that the authors were unable to obtain some of the published studies, and thus did not “formally include” these studies. – This is a bias too.
o Regarding the discussion of methodological problems: There are at least some hints that patients (not healthy individuals) willing to be randomised are less active in the ´process of recovery´ (I have tried to avoid the term ´interested´).

o Maybe you should add some sentences on the unspecific (placebo) effects which could contribute to the discussion, particularly to explain the citation (page 15): “Bach flower practitioner argues that ´qualities such as compassion, trust, empathy, and positive motivation can directly help to improve outcomes´”.

**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.