Reviewer’s report

Title: Australian women's use of complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) to enhance fertility: exploring the experiences of women and practitioners

Version: 1 Date: 18 September 2009

Reviewer: Fuschia M. Sirois

Reviewer’s report:

The authors report findings from a qualitative study of women who use CAM for fertility enhancement and practitioners’ perceptions of the women’s motivations for doing so. The topic is timely and the findings are interesting. However, the paper would benefit from a more thorough and up to date literature review on CAM use and fertility and motivations for CAM use. There are also some issues regarding the presentation of the method sand findings that need attention.

Major Compulsory Revisions

On page 4 in the introduction, the authors present findings from Astin’s 1998 study on the reasons for CAM use as if it were theory. While I agree that this study was an important first articulation of the motivations involved in CAM use it did not present a “theory” per se, but instead provided some possible explanations. There are a number of researchers who have proposed or adapted theories to explain CAM use which have not been cited (Bishop, Yardley, & Lewith, 2006;2007; Sirois & Gick, 2002; Sirois & Purc-Stephenson, 2008; Sirois, 2008, BMC CAM). Most of these studies are much more current than the Astin paper. In fact, the general findings regarding women’s reasons for suing CAM for fertility (involvement in treatment, wanting a less paternalistic relationship with their provider) are a common theme in the use of CAM across other studies, and could therefore be a point of discussion when comparing the current findings (i.e., page 18). Please update this reference with some of the newer works and/or use the term "theory" cautiously as it can be understood to mean different things depending on one's discipline.

On page 5 the authors present the demographic profile of Australian CAM users. How is this profile different or similar to CAM users elsewhere? A comparison to other CAM users would help with understanding how the results may o may not generalize to other CAM users in other countries.

The authors state that they could only locate two other studies examining the use of Cam to enhance fertility. I believe that there are several other papers available that have to been cited. The authors may want to review this short briefing paper by Mark Bovey from the British Acupuncture Council written in 2006 which provides an overview of ALL the studies, including RCTs, that have examined topic of CAM and fertility treatments.
http://www.lindaculleton.co.uk/docs/Research%20from%20the%20B.Ac.C%20on%20infertility.pdf
I also noticed that a recent paper on concurrent CAM and ART use was not cited: Boivin & Schmidt (2009), Human Reproduction, http://humrep.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/24/7/1626

The findings from this paper are somewhat controversial and give a different view on the use of CAM for fertility. Nonetheless, given the focus of the paper, this other study should be mentioned.

On page for the analysis, can the authors elaborate on the particular type of qualitative analysis they used (thematic content analysis?), and why this particular strategy was chosen. There are numerous ways to approach qualitative data, and usually some sort of rationale for the choice made is required.

Also, the presentation of the methods used for the focus groups is a bit confusing. It should be made clearer that focus groups were conducted separately for each of the sample groups, clients and practitioners, as well as how many focus groups with each group were conducted. Some re-organization is needed here as the reader shouldn’t wait to find this out in the results section.

I am also curious as to why the practitioners’ results were presented before those from the women who participated. Given the title and the focus of the paper I would have thought that it would be the other way around. Please reverse the order or provide a good rationale as to why the results are presented this way.

The limitations section is very brief and could benefit from an expanded and more thoughtful discussion of the issues involved when conducting qualitative research. The authors state the limitation is the small sample size; but why is this an issue? In qualitative research it is usually expected that the sample size will be small as generalizability of the findings is NOT the aim as it is with quantitative research. There are of course limitations but I do not believe that the authors have flushed these out enough in way that makes sense given the methodology that was used.

Minor Essential Revisions
It may be useful for the reader to have a table highlighting the main themes that emerged from the two samples, with exemplar statements for each.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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'