Reviewer's report

Title: Malnutrition and responsibility in elder care - high-level decision-makers' ethical reasoning

Version: 6 Date: 21 December 2009

Reviewer: Roger Watson

Reviewer's report:

This paper takes an interesting and unusual view of the issue of malnutrition in the care of older people; normally, this is focused on practice, especially nursing practice, and the views elicited here are of interest in terms of illuminating some misunderstandings across the policy/practice divide.

While the paper has a stated aim this is not specifically expressed as a research question. The methods are appropriate but could be better described in terms of the overall design; the approach to questioning (structured/semi-structured/open) and the extent to which the authors were satisfied that they attained a complete view of the perceptions at this level - they did mention redundancy, but this is the 'other side of that coin' - akin to saturation of data in other qualitative methods. Also, the precise way the participants were selected should be explained: did they cover them all or take a sample and did all who were contacted agree to be interviewed?

The data are sound in relation to the methods applied; I am uncertain if the manuscript adheres to relevant standards for reporting and deposition; perhaps this does not apply to qualitative data.

The discussion is very thorough and easily supported by the data but the limitations of the study and the methods are not discussed. There is a methodological consideration section after the discussion but this is mostly about justifying the methods from a positive perspective; could be more critical and, perhaps, this should appear alongside the methods in the appropriate earlier section.

Previous sources of work are widely acknowledged and an entirely appropriate range of literature is covered without specifying the method of searching and retrieval. The title and abstract are appropriate and the writing is acceptable but poor in the methodological consideration where it lacks 'flow' - could be remedied by giving the methods a more full consideration in the methods section.

Therefore I specify the following:

Major Compulsory Revisions:

1. specify a research question.
2. explain precisely how participants were obtained.
3. describe type of questioning used.
4. consider the limitations in the methods and study.

Minor Essential Revisions:
None

Discretionary Revisions:
5. describe retrieval of data if a systematic approach was used.

**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