Reviewer's report

Title: Ethical challenges in connection with the use of coercion. A focus group study of health care personnel in mental health care

Version: 2 Date: 20 July 2014

Reviewer: Stefan Priebe

Reviewer's report:

Ethical considerations about coercion in mental health are certainly an important issue, and papers contributing to the evidence base and debate should be welcome.

I am writing this review as a psychiatrist and empirical researcher, not as an ethicist. So, I am less competent to comment on the ethical discussion than on how this was conducted as a qualitative study. I understand that this is not the main domain of the authors, but since this is presented as a study I think it is fair to assess it as such.

Discretionary revisions

• I accept that as an ethicist one might tend to be very elaborate on the ethical considerations. Yet, the current section looks a bit over the top for such a harmless study.

Minor essential revisions

• When quotes are presented in the paper, it should be indicated which person said this in which group. The reader needs to know whether all of the quotes are from the same person, whether all groups are mentioned and so on.

• When the authors have a specific section on strengths and limitations, they should list some of the many limitations (e.g. self selected participants, no multi-disciplinary team, no proper transcription and line by line coding of interviews, no inter-rater reliability, small number of interviews in each setting, and so on).

• The authors rightly point out that ethical questions can be difficult to distinguish from practical ones. Yet, in their question to the interviewees they mixed this, and it is not clear what interviewees understood as an ethical challenge, rather than – for example – a clinical, practical or legal one. Perhaps, the results are very much influenced by the interviewees’s understanding of the term ethical. This should at least be discussed.

Major compulsory revisions

• The authors mention that this is part of a larger study. I think the reader would want to know how the presented paper fits into the larger study and why this relatively small piece is published separately.

• Again, I appreciate that the authors are not empirical researchers. Still, I think
the methodology should be presented more clearly. It looks to me as if some people were gathered and asked for their experiences. This may be the reason to call it interviews. Yet, the focus group methodology as used in research is very different from interviews. If it is just about identifying experiences, there is little advantage of interviewing people in groups (as interviewees tend to influence each other) other than the economical one. Focus groups are meant to explore issues and opinions in more depth by challenging views and going through different scenarios. This seems not to have happened, and it all looks more like a group interview than a focus group. This should be clarified and addressed.

- The paper ends practically with the same conclusion that it started with, i.e. that there are various ethical challenges, that everything is complex and that systematic research is required. So, what exactly was the study intended to add to the literature, and what has it succeeded in adding? What do we know now, that we did not know before? I am confident that there is something in the material that is sufficiently new and of interest, but this should be more much clearly presented.

- One of the major risks of qualitative research is that the researchers are biased and just look for material that confirms their views. This study was conducted by three people based in a department for medical ethics. Was there any attempt to obtain a more multi-disciplinary perspective? Are the authors sure that they did not just use the statements in the interviews to underpin what they thought anyway? This should be addressed and possibly discussed in the paper.

- The results are a list of what people said, a type of non-systematic content analysis. In a study of this type one would normally expect more analysis. E.g. were there overarching themes, what was the variation, was there saturation on the themes, was there contradictory material, on which challenges did and on which ones did the groups not agree?

- I think the discussion in an original research report should focus on what is presented in the results (which normally includes a comparison with the literature). There should be no further results, and no discussion that is not directly linked to or based on the results. In the current discussion there are new quotes. There are also some statements with which I wholeheartedly, but it is unclear how they can be directly derived from the material presented in the results.

- At the same time, the results should be a report of the results and their analysis and no interpretation. In the current version this appears to be mixed.

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.