Reviewer's report

Title: Identifying online information needs for a palliative care website: An action-research-inspired approach

Version: 1 Date: 6 March 2007

Reviewer: David Currow

Reviewer's report:

Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?
The issue of consumer involvement in website development is clearly an important issue, but not new. Likewise, the issue of consumer involvement in developing palliative care websites is not new, but it is not well documented in the literature and as such this paper has the potential to add to this area.

Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?
The methods are not well defined. The literature review is not at all defined, and there are some significant omissions from even the quoted literature around key issues in websites. The features of "health on the net" are not expanded in order for an international audience to understand what is occurring there. There is no definition of how the literature review was achieved.

Given that the audience for the website is changing through this project (a key issue that is not dealt with by the authors) the limitations of the online survey (current users) is not outlined at all.

The needs identification is cursory in the outline in the methods.

This is a descriptive study where the descriptions particularly are of the results in Stage 1 (the literature review) are not adequate. There needs to be a robust discussion about the literature that has been accessed. The needs identification is limited and really not strongly cross referenced to either the existing audience or the subsequent audience. Most disappointingly, for a project that started in 2003 there is no closure of the loop saying that the changes to the website have actually improved access either for the professionals (who appeared reasonably happy with the website the way it was) nor for the potential audience of new users. As such the publication of this in a health informatics journal is questionable.

Are the discussions and conclusion well balanced?
The discussion really fails to identify how this project (and this appears not to be a research project) discusses the limitations of either the existing website, the new website, limitation in process nor limitations in design. There is no critique of how things would be done differently, nor indeed the future directions that this research should take.

Do the title and abstract convey what has been found?
The title does not adequately describe what has occurred. The information needs both from the literature and from the focus groups is not well described.

Is the writing adequate?
Yes

Overall I think there are some major compulsory revisions that need to occur for this to be acceptable for publication. The literature review needs to identify literature in the review and for the literature that was not used. The use of expert groups as opposed to focus groups needs to be addressed in the text.

More than anything else. I believe the paper would be strengthened greatly by user acceptability and information that the processes that have been undertaken by the project team have actually lead to an improved website that is meeting the more complex needs of people more effectively.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of limited interest
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'