Reviewer's report

**Title:** Analysis of clinical uncertainties by health professionals and patients: an example from mental health

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 11 January 2009

**Reviewer:** Anthony Jorm

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**Major Compulsory Revisions**

1. In the Methods sub-section of the Abstract, some details should be given that are currently in the Results sub-section: the number of participants; reference to the PICO format. Also in the Methods sub-section, it needs to be made clear what the linguistic taxonomy refers to (“a linguistic taxonomy of...”).

2. In the Methods section of the main text, the number of patients and clinicians needs to be given. It also needs to be clarified how the convenience sample referred to there relates to the DUET database mentioned in the Results. If they are the same, this needs to be made clear.

3. Given that the P of PICO stands for Patient and all the questions were selected to be about schizophrenia, it is not clear why this element was not always satisfied.

4. In the Methods it is stated that “discrepancies identified and discussed to agree on definitions. We then assessed inter-rater agreement”. It is unclear whether inter-rater agreement was done on independently made ratings or after there had been discussion between raters.

5. In the Methods it is stated that “Questions were clustered according to an emergent taxonomy”. This needs to be explained in sufficient detail to allow replication by other researchers. Who did it and what methods were used?

6. On p. 5, it is stated that kappas showed “moderate agreement”. However, on the next page some of the kappas are described as “low”. There have been published standards for giving verbal descriptions of kappas. It might help to consult one of these and use the terms for strength of agreement accordingly.

7. Page 6 mentions that the chi-square test could not be carried out because of the low numbers and assumptions not being met. Exact tests are widely available these days (e.g. in SPSS) which overcomes this problem.

8. On p. 6, it is unclear what the chi-square tests are comparing. This should be described in the Methods. In particular, the first chi-square test involves all the PICO elements. However, if there was a count of number of PICO elements mentioned, this test would not be the appropriate approach.

9. In Table 2, it is unclear what denominator the %s relate to. This could be indicated with a total n which corresponds to 100%.

10. Similarly, in Table 4, it is not clear what denominator these are %s of.
Minor Essential Revisions
1. On p. 6, use the Greek letter chi rather than x.
2. On p. 6, “How” has a capital, but not “What” etc.
3. Page 7, line 2, has missing apostrophe.
4. Page 7, last sentence of paragraph 1, “information…are” should be “information…is”.
5. Page 7, last paragraphs, “It is basic” should be “It is a basic”.
6. Table 4. I think “30.65” is meant to be “30.6%”.

Discretionary Revisions
I have broader conceptual issue with this research that the authors may wish to consider. They are interested in how people naturally ask questions about treatment uncertainties. However, the method they used allowed for a single question. I would argue that what people naturally do is carry out a dialogue. This obviously occurs in conversations, but I think also in queries of databases. For example, if I use PubMed, I may put in an incomplete query. If PubMed then tells me that there are 10,000 abstracts relevant, I will then add another element to reduce the number down. I may also look at some of the abstracts and decide that they are not actually what I want and change my terms accordingly. I would have preferred to see this type of research carried out in a more realistic way using an actual database like PubMed or Google, with people trying to answer their questions as they naturally would. It may be that people actually do use the PICO elements, but not in one query.

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'