Reviewer's report

Title: Dignity in the Care of Older People - A Review of the Theoretical and Empirical Literature

Version: 1 Date: 26 November 2007

Reviewer: Derek D Sellman

Reviewer's report:

General

I enjoyed reading this article on an important topic of direct relevance to health care practice in general and to nursing practice in particular. However, it is a curious hybrid which sets out to combine elements of ‘systematic review’ with those of a ‘review article’. I am not convinced that the resultant paper is actually ‘a review of the … literature’ (as indicated by the title) for a number of reasons. The most significant is perhaps the tendency for the authors to slip into normative claims within the framework of a descriptive piece. The first of their three questions ‘What does dignity mean?’ might be a reasonable aim for a paper of this length and this is perhaps indicative of an attempt to cover too much ground in a single paper. The first two questions may be empirical but the third is not, and I think it a mistake to try to answer the third with the empirical literature used here. And it may be this that leads the authors into their normative claims.

I am afraid that I do not think the paper as presented is suitable for publication although I do believe there is a paper (perhaps more than one paper) struggling to emerge from this submission.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

‘Dignity’ is one of those terms that leads to circular definitions because the related terms from which we try to distinguish it end up as the very terms we use to describe it. The authors here are at pains to claim that dignity is distinct from ‘respect’ and ‘autonomy’ yet those ideas (and in the case of ‘respect’, the same term) are used in some places as interchangeable and this lends to the sense that they have been unable to disentangle dignity from these other ideas. This is most apparent on page 14 where the example of institutionalised ‘disrespect’ and Frank Dobson’s quote are both used to illustrate claims about dignity. In this way there are elements of attempting some conceptual clarity about the term, necessary of course at the start when undertaking a systematic search of the literature, but the search terms used are limited. If dignity is a multifaceted concept, as claimed late in the paper, then at the very least one would expect terms that reflect this multifaceted idea to be included as search terms. Towards the end of the paper dignity is claimed as being intimately concerned with ‘value’.
or ‘worth’ and as related to being treated with ‘appropriate respect’. From this it would not be unreasonable to expect the terms ‘value’, ‘worth’ and ‘(treated with) respect’ to be amongst the initial search terms. Restricting the search terms thus seems to undermine the paper within its own terms of reference.

There is also an argumentative strand that threads through some of the paper even though this is not a stated aim, and it is from this argument that the authors makes a number of claims that find little support from those arguments as they are presented. Some of these claims are normative and are not helped by the adoption of ungrounded assertions (e.g., on page 2 in the final paragraph under ‘Background’ where the implication is that nurses should take a lead on dignity but no rationale for this claim is provided).

Similarly, toward the end of the paper there is a claim that “…[dignity] remains a useful concept” (page 14) but it is not clear what the argument for this claim is. Indeed a large section of the paper seems to imply that in the main, dignity is used rhetorically and as such is an unhelpful concept.

My final comment here relates to an impression that all of the empirical material found and used relates to some form of survey of the perceptions of what dignity means. If my suspicion is correct then such empirical material does not seem to be the most appropriate material to answer either of the first two questions as they a posed. It might answer questions of the kind ‘what do people understand dignity to mean for them?’ and ‘what is it that people believe to promote or diminish their dignity?’ but those are different questions.

Generally speaking the paper would be improved by greater coherence as I find the tone of the paper changes significantly (e.g., compared to the material presented on pages 6 & 7, that presented on page 14 could be from an altogether different paper) and this adds to the impression of a paper unsure about its intent.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

There are a few typographical errors that require correction:

Page 3, paragraph 4 (starting ‘Our search strategies…‘): there is a change of tense in this paragraph – it may merely require replacing ‘is’ with ‘was’ in the sentence ‘Our intention is…

P10, para 3 (‘There are many…‘): toward the conclusion of this paragraph ‘for example’ appears twice in the same sentence. I think this is an error.

P13. Para 3 (‘Concerns regarding …‘): There is a period in what I take to be the penultimate sentence that I think should be a comma.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
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 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 have no competing interests