Reviewer's report

Title: Integrative care for the management of low back pain: design of a clinical care pathway

Version: 2 Date: 7 July 2010

Reviewer: Martin Underwood

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for asking me to review this paper describing an approach to allocating patients to treatment. This paper presents an interesting problem in terms of how to assess its quality. An immediate problem, which may relate to the way different healthcare systems work, is the title. For me, a clinical care pathway is rather different to the process described here. In the paper, the activity is described as creating treatment plans. The title needs to be changed to more accurately reflect how international readers would describe the contents of the paper.

It is important that both active and control interventions in trials of complex interventions are adequately described. It makes sense to publish papers describing these separate from the main trial. That this work is part of a funded RCT suggests that the scientific quality of the intervention development process has already been subject to peer review, and so we would anticipate publishing these with minimal further scrutiny. If, however, this was a robust paper describing the development of the intervention I would have expected to see the theoretical justification from bringing the various components together with underpinning evidence where appropriate. This paper does not present the justification for the intervention; it is rather describing what happened in the clinic when the patient was seen. Essentially, it is, therefore, a process evaluation of the intervention. Such process data should be presented alongside trial results to help interpret the findings. There are few actual data from the process evaluation and little or no method on how some of the data, such as rationales for recommendations in Table 4, were collected. I am not convinced that the amount of new data presented here is sufficient to justify a stand-alone publication.

I am concerned that the authors may be missing an opportunity to tell us why they chose the components of their intervention and to tell us in detail how it functioned when they tried to run it. This would be a really interesting paper.

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 I have no competing interests