Reviewer's report

Title: Why is recruitment to end-of-life research in primary care still so difficult? A comparison of recruitment of older patients and carers across three English NHS regions.

Version: 2 Date: 6 July 2012

Reviewer: Frederick Burge

Reviewer's report:

I believe this paper is a solid contribution to the research methods literature. Its particular contribution is in helping others improve the methods to successfully recruit study participants for research related to end of life care. This, by itself contributes to the literature on what I perceive is a "doubly challenging" recruitment issue: that of recruiting participants to end of life studies (fought with many issues itself) and then added to this is the issue of recruiting from generalist primary care settings where this aspect of provided health services is only one of many competing care issues in a practice setting not typically setup for research studies.

It is however critically important that we do as well as we can at recruitment of these individuals from this setting as it is in this setting that the bulk of early end of life care is undertaken, organized or planned.

I do not suggest any major compulsory revisions.

Suggested minor revisions:

I would suggest a slight title change: perhaps "A comparison of recruitment 'strategies' might better describe the paper's goal.

Also, the authors use the word "still" so difficult in the title, implying that something change that should have made this better. This is not clear in the paper. Is it the creation of the research networks that was hoped to make this better?

There is some confusion to me in describing the two studies used to form the foundation for this paper. In the abstract it reports that study 1 includes older patients living with "cancer", and study 2 includes carers of those who died of one of several chronic diseases. This is reversed in the paper and when the study of those living with advanced cancer is outlined it seems as though they were a sub-group of a broader set up people identified as not a surprise if they died in coming 12 months. I think this could be just a bit clearer to the reader.

In paragraph 3, p 8 the authors outline that 107/120 carers were identified throught GP practices. How were the other 13 identified?

To make section headings consistent I would suggest changing the heading on
In the discussion section:

I think, if I have read this clearly, there was less representation of disadvantaged populations in the region where there was less direct research network recruitment efforts (that is, the network staff did not cull the practice lists to identify folks, but rather relied on "knowledge" of GPs). If this is true, I think it should be emphasized a bit more.

The notion of the practices being "gatekeepers" has a bit of a "value" statement implied, both positive and negative that begs some explanation. This gatekeeping role can be both protective for fragile carers and patients, but may also be paternalistic denying them the opportunity to consent for themselves about such research participation. The other notion of gatekeeping is that research teams may see this as active "blocking" of access to possible participants. In fact, it may not be conscious "blocking" but just simply that the practice staff are just "too busy" to get their heads around this research role which may be culturally foreign to their day to day work.

Given the great need to recruit participants from this setting, it begs a research study all by itself of GP practice staff to understand what might "work better" to facilitate the process!

Figure 1. In the left hand column, second box it says 72 GP practices with 598,971 registered patients. Does this mean that 72 of the 349 practices agreed to participate? This figure might also deserve a footnote to remind the reader why the numbers don't add up to 120 as cited in the initial description of the study participants

**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.