Reviewer’s report

Title: How the stigma of low literacy can impair patient-professional interactions and affect health: insights from a qualitative investigation

Version: 1 Date: 28 April 2013

Reviewer: Graham Kramer

Reviewer’s report:

Major Compulsory Revisions: None

Minor Essential Revisions: I struggled a bit with the long sentence that concludes the first paragraph of the results on page 8. May be better to simplify.

Discretionary revisions: It may be useful for the authors to suggest any implications for further research that may be raised by their findings.

I thought this was a valuable qualitative piece of research which powerfully describes the impact that low functional literacy has on peoples social confidence particularly within the healthcare context. It richly describes how such shame and stigma can be hidden from healthcare professionals both through lack of awareness of HCPs but also by conscious attempts by people to hide their difficulties.

It aptly argues that because of this concealment a shame-free "universal precautions" approach should be taken by health care professionals.

The methods in this study were robust, ethics committee approved, with an adequate sample size, the transcripts cross checked by three team members and triangulated using a focus group.

The limits of the study are well described in the discussion. I would imagine the conclusions are generalisable across different demographic contexts and the study perhaps would be enhanced by a focus group of adult learners in a different region. However, I do not think the quality of the research is diminished by this absence.

The conclusions are clearly relevant to the results.

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 financial conflicts of interest.
Phyllis Easton and Vikki Entwistle are co-members on the National health
Literacy Action Group for which I am also a member.