Reviewer's report

Title: Attitudes of Gastroenterologists and Hepatologists Toward Participation in Clinical Research

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Reviewer: Merran Toerien

Reviewer's report:

This paper contributes to the important field of research investigating barriers to physicians' participation in clinical research. The research question is clear and well-defined, and the paper is, in the main, very well-written. The title and abstract are clear. The data appear to be sound and the manuscript adheres to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition. The following suggested revisions, while essential, are mostly relatively minor.

Minor essential revisions.

1. Choice of physician groups. The research compares gastroenterologists and hepatologists but provides no explanation for why either of these groups was chosen or why the comparison is of importance. This should be explained in the introduction.

2. Literature. I thought the reference list was a little thin given the amount of previous work published in this area. For a useful review in relation to oncology, see: Fayter, D et al. (2006). Systematic review of barriers, modifiers and benefits involved in participation in cancer clinical trials. Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, University of York (see: http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/crd/pdf/crdreport31.pdf)

3. Methods (i). These are appropriate and clearly described. However, it would be useful to know a little more about the exploratory questionnaire used to generate questions. Did this include open questions in an effort to ensure that unexpected factors affecting research participation were allowed to emerge?

4. Methods (ii). The authors should specify how they defined those with and without clinical research experience (e.g. did participants have to indicate 0% in response to the item “research-clinical” in Question 8, or 0% to all three of the research items, etc.?)

5. Methods (iii). Related to point 3 above, there appears to be some slippage between “clinical research” and “clinical trials” in the questionnaire and in the paper. As a whole, both the paper and the questionnaire focus on trials, yet some of the items in the questionnaire refer to types of research that do not necessarily involve a trial design. E.g. the question in item 11 refers to trials, but the fourth option lists epidemiological research, which is not necessarily conducted through a trial design. And the options of “Research-Basic; Research-Clinical and Research-Academic” do not necessarily involve trial research specifically. Towards the end of the methods section, the authors state: “Differences
between... physicians with and without clinical research experience, and physicians with limited and extensive clinical trial experience were also evaluated”. Were these two terms (“clinical research” and “clinical trial”) chosen deliberately? In other words, for those who were counted as having clinical research experience, was this necessarily trial experience?

6. Limitations of the work. The authors do provide a clear statement of some of the limitations of the study. However, their paragraph considering the possibility of bias in their sample is oddly worded (see second page of the Discussion). They rightly acknowledge that there would have been a risk of bias if they had limited their study to physicians with current or previous participation in clinical research. However, they do not seem to consider that, by drawing all participants from the American Association for the study of liver diseases, they may still have a sample that is biased in favour of research activity (since physicians with no interest in research may be less likely to be members). Given the focus on barriers to research, this risk of bias should also be mentioned – particularly as it may partly account for the relatively high numbers of participants who reported being research active.

7. Figures. The results section would be easier to follow if the authors made it clearer which sections relate to which figures. Also, the current reference to Figure 3 (under the heading “Factors influencing patient enrolment in clinical research) appears to be in the wrong place as the figure shows no comparison but the preceding sentence compares gastroenterologists and hepatologists.

8. Discussion. The discussion should include some consideration of the implications of the findings regarding differences between gastroenterologists and hepatologists. As this was central to the research design, the absence of this in the discussion is notable.

9. Conclusion. The conclusion refers to concerns regarding relationships with sponsors, especially regarding publication, which I could not find reported in the results.

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.