Reviewer’s report

Title: Targeted individual exercise programmes for older medical patients is feasible, and changes hospital and patient outcomes: a service improvement project

Version: 1 Date: 16 May 2008

Reviewer: Nicholas F Taylor

Reviewer’s report:

Targeted individual exercise programmes for older medical patients is (sic) feasible, and changes hospital and patient outcomes: a service improvement project

This clearly written manuscript investigates the feasibility of implementing a targeted exercise program for patients at risk of functional decline. The manuscript also presents some preliminary data comparing the outcomes of patients who completed the program with patients who did not. The rationale and background for the study are well argued. The major concern is whether it is reasonable to compare the 24 patients who did not commence the program with 163 patients who did. Would this be a better paper if it just concentrated on the feasibility of implementing the program, including full details about any adverse events, and provided more details about the exercise intervention?

Major compulsory revisions

The major concern is the comparison group of n=24. Is it valid to compare this group who did not do the exercise program due to ‘resource limitations’, to the group who completed the exercise program? Because of the acknowledged non-random allocation, there may have been factors that introduced bias and accounted for the trends to poorer outcome observed in the control group, apart from the intervention. The analysis (based on numbers and percentages in Table 2) appears to have been based on the 163 completers in the FMP group, which may not be a fair comparison with the usual care group, which presumably would have included a similar proportion of about 17% who would have to have withdraw for various reasons – this could skew the results. The very small numbers in the control group mean that the observed differences may be quite unstable. Although it would help to more fully describe the 2 groups at baseline, I am not sure if it will help overcome this limitation.

Minor essential revisions

Title: (page 1, line 1): Change to ‘are feasible’.

Abstract: (page 2, last line): Write FMP in full on first use.

Abstract: (page 2, Intervention and Results): Clarify who the comparison group
Background: (page 4, second last line): Is reference number 9, a Physiotherapy department report (presumably unpublished), accessible? Suggest that section related to pilot is deleted, as the rationale for the study is still strong without this information.

Intervention: (page 8, paragraph 3): I think the intervention should be described in greater detail, to allow replication. Could a sample exercise programme for an individual be included detailing exercises, equipment, dose and intensity? In what way were the exercises individualised – on what assessment factors were they based? Clarify if the exercise programs were administered individually by the AHA’s.

Statistical analysis: (page 9, line 2): Explain, or at least reference the patient complexity factor (PCCL index).

Results: (page 10, paragraph 2): Was being referred to physiotherapy an inclusion criterion for this study? This does not seem to match with the eligibility criteria detailed in the Methods section.

Results: (page 11, line 3): Was resource limitations the only factor that determined the usual care group?

Results: (page 11, paragraph 1): Need to establish baseline characteristics of both groups to persuade the reader that they were similar. I know this has been partly taken into account with the variables of age, gender and PCCL index in the logistic regression, but there may be other factors which differentiate the groups.

Results: (page 11, paragraph 1): In keeping with being a feasibility trial, more details about any adverse events should be reported. Was there any short term muscle soreness reported, were there any missed sessions due to the effects of the previous session?

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'