Reviewer's report

Title: Exposing the essential functions of a complex intervention: Case study of a context-sensitive process evaluation for a trial of shared care in mental health

Version: 1 Date: 17 August 2008

Reviewer: Susan Michie

Reviewer's report:

This paper reports a process evaluation of an RCT and, as such, is an example of good practice in this area. It is generally well written with potentially useful findings.

Major compulsory revisions

There are two main issues that need to be addressed: the reporting of the method used and the extent of overlap with a companion paper (ref 19). The present paper should stand alone sufficiently to allow replicability; at present the description of the method is too general to allow this. For example how are interactions examined and core functions defined (p. 9), and component assigned to mechanisms and predictors of outcome ascertained (p. 10)? What specifically does "Realistic Evaluation" contribute over and above a more general qualitative process evaluation working within a conceptual or theoretical framework (which many do)?. The Discussion states that this is the first known use of Realistic Evaluation for conducting a process evaluation of an RCT. It would be useful to know exactly what elements are innovative. Reference 19 critiques the Method; readers should be given a summary of the critique so that their evaluation of this paper is not dependent on reading the other. Any re-submission should be accompanied by Ref 19 to allow an assessment of overlap and need for inclusion of methodological details currently in Ref 19.

The difference between the two sets of contextual factors in Figure 1 is not clear. The abstract is very difficult to understand or follow and does not do justice to the paper; it should be re-written with more clarity and less jargon.

Discretionary revision

If the title could be amended to be a little more elegant, that would be a bonus.

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