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: 19 August 2008

Reviewer: Bronagh Blackwood

Reviewer’s report:

This paper presents the findings from a realistic evaluation of the Mental Health Link project that help to explain the results of an accompanying RCT measuring the effectiveness of the project. The authors acknowledge that this is the first time that a realistic evaluation has been used in conjunction with an RCT and, therefore, this paper represents a positive step towards greater use of realistic evaluation in this area.

Prior to publication, I would suggest that some modification is undertaken to provide greater clarity for the reader. In particular, the authors should: make it clearer from the beginning which aspect of the evaluation is being presented; justify why this paper is adding something not contained in the previous publications; and provide sufficient information for the reader to enable the paper to ‘stand alone’ without needing to read the previous publications relating to the project evaluation.

Major compulsory revisions

Modifying the title and the abstract would be helpful to convey the aim of the paper earlier for the reader. As it stands, this only begins to become clear at the end of the background section. In addition, the a priori theoretical model presented in Figure 1 requires more explanation to help the reader understand what the relationship is between the fixed and flexible components, contextual factors and outcomes.

Realistic evaluation is an appropriate method for understanding how and why interventions work by exploring context, mechanism and outcomes, and it is clear why the authors interviewed key stakeholders in the project, i.e. practitioners and managers. What is missing is the view of the patient and the authors should consider providing a rationale for the absence of the patient’s voice in the realistic evaluation.

A modified form of analytic induction was used in the cross case analysis of 12 cases to build middle range theories. It would be helpful if the authors could explain how this inductive analysis fits in with testing the Context Mechanism and Outcome (CMO) configurations that are developed in a realistic evaluation. In addition, the results highlighted ‘catalysing, doing and reviewing’ as the key change management functions of the facilitators, perhaps the authors could provide some further detail on how these emerged and are defined.
Minor essential revisions
Please clarify the reference to Figure 1 on page 10 and where Figure 2 fits in.
Table 1 provides a schematic representation of outcomes in the RCT and realistic evaluation, but this is not easily understood and it may be helpful to explain/provide more detail for the symbols.
Please provide a key for abbreviations.

**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.