Reviewer's report

Title: Prevalence of serious mental illness among Tibetan refugees: A systematic review

Version: 1 Date: 17 August 2005

Reviewer: Mina Fazel

Reviewer's report:

General

This paper is a review of torture and mental illness in Tibetan refugee populations and includes 5 studies, with a total 410 adults and children, as the result of a broad and thorough search. It is a unique survey of this area and the authors try to highlight the possible human rights abuses currently taking place in China.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

The title is somewhat misleading as it is not just a study looking at the 'Prevalence of mental illness among Tibetan Refugees: A systematic review'; much of the article is about torture and experiences of torture.

This leads to the main issue that this paper needs to address which is how to present the information gathered on both mental illness and on torture. In the paper the two are often presented together and the information might be more accessible to a broader readership if the two issues are separated, although torture and subsequent mental illness is obviously inter-related.

With regards to the prevalence of mental illness, the following points would need to be addressed:
1. Justification needs to be given for the stated prevalence of specific disorders. The authors state they made some assessment of validity of instruments but not of reliability. This area is so essential though that much more information needs to be given.
2. The HSCL-25 is used in 4 of the 5 included studies and so this questionnaire needs to be explained in greater detail. It is a screening tool and therefore some caution is required in order to infer prevalences of mental illness from its results.
3. The authors would improve the interpretation of results if they could address the issues of how to determine which refugees fulfilled diagnostic criteria for the disorders stated. They also compare prevalence rates to other studies of refugees but these studies use very different inclusion criteria (random or complete samples; semi-structured interviews, etc..) and therefore the results are not comparable.
4. The samples in the studies need further explanation, some are case-control studies, others are cross-sectional and so the prevalence rates in the studies will differ and so some explanation is required to understand figures 1, 2, and 3 as to which data is used, for example, in the case-control studies.

The information gathered on torture experienced in the refugees could be presented together in a sub-section rather than piecemeal with summaries of each study included. The authors could consider collating some of the methods of torture in a table and reference the studies alongside each separate technique.
The discussion would need a greater exploration of the limitations of the study, especially addressing the methodological concerns of the different studies and the limitations in concluding true psychiatric prevalences from the instruments used.

In addition, the discussion exposes the possible human rights abuses of the current Chinese government and encourages ‘governments and economic partners’ to put pressure on China to address these concerns. While I am sympathetic to the sentiments expressed, some caution is needed in the interpretation of results from just 5 studies especially in light of some of the biases of the populations sampled (and that all those sampled were living in India, a government accused of using similar torture techniques). Given the possible high use of torture by many Western and non-Western governments, robust, comparative data on prevalence of PTSD, for example, could help make this point in a more rigorous manner.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Some further background information on Tibet, for example population of Tibetans in China, would help to place in context the figure of 150,000 Tibetans living outside of the country.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests