Reviewer's report

Title: Barriers and Opportunities for Enhancing Patient Recruitment into Clinical Research: Findings for an Interview Study in an NHS Academic Health Sciences Centre

Version: Date: 21 October 2014

Reviewer: Bryony Soper

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The paper is now much improved following revision.

Minor Essential revisions

1. Related to the authors’ response to prior comment at 2.4

The last paragraph of the section of the text on ‘Background’ which starts “Despite this extensive literature...” and is now on p.6 has been radically re-written. It now deals with (i) national systematic initiatives, (ii) stresses the importance of context (though without noting whether and in the terms used in Table 1 this context is study-specific, centre specific, trust specific or extra organisational), and (iii) emphasises the value of qualitative studies. It then notes the value of examining all this from the recruiters’ point of view. Much of this is helpful.

But in all this, a message in the earlier text about the importance of the local context has been lost from the start of the paragraph, i.e. the importance of understanding organisational issues in addition to the extra-organisational issues. This missing text said: “In all, despite an extensive literature on strategies for enhancing patient recruitment to research, there remains lack of substantive, high quality research evidence of the actual activities and experience of ongoing patient recruitment work (Treweek 2010; McDonald 2012; Fletcher 2012) and of the impact of organisational strategies on this work. Moreover, as Gul and Abi (2010) note, the majority of recommended interventions for enhancing the recruitment and retention of patients in clinical studies are ‘piecemeal’ (for example, the improvement of patient information resources) and take little account of how local cultures and practices of recruitment work influence the effectiveness of such interventions. In other words, it is unclear how, and how far, the different sets of issues that support or undermine patient recruitment into research are interconnected in general and specific clinical settings, research teams and research centers.”

The authors do, it is true, comment later in the paragraph on the article’s focus on trust and extra-organisational or national levels. But without the earlier text, this comment has, to my mind, much less force.

I’m not sure if the authors intended to omit this earlier text; the reference to Gul and Abi that it contains are still included in the list of references. But could they
perhaps consider re-wording this paragraph to address the points raise above?

2. Related to the authors’ response to prior comment at 3.2.

In response to my query about the sense of the figures given about recruitment levels in the research setting of the study, the authors have now removed these figures altogether (and I’m sorry by the way if I gave the impression I thought they couldn’t add or were using false information – this wasn’t at all what I intended – it was the interpretation of the figures that was my concern). In the light of the authors’ concerns about anonymity the removal of these figures is probably wise.

But what was especially telling in their response was the reason why these figures are what they are: i.e. the fact that some trials had been open for one or two or more years without recruiting one suitable research participant. This harsh fact helps to explain why there are such sensitivities about the study and its findings (though obviously there are other reasons for this as well). It also helps to explain local R&D managers’ concerns (now noted in the text on p. 8) – not only was overall recruitment low in comparison to other research groups, but also within that particular research group some studies were failing to recruit at all.

Appreciating all this made a considerable difference to my understanding of the reasons for the study in the first instance, and to very real difficulties encountered in recruitment and the related sensibilities of the participants involved. It might do the same for other readers. Would it be possible therefore to expand the last sentence of the first paragraph on p.8 to cover this point: i.e. “During the year of the study (October 2011- September 2012) its recruitment figures represented 3.5% of all patients recruited to research in the Trust, and, in some instances, trials had been open for one or two or more years without recruiting one suitable research participant”.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

None