Reviewer's report

**Title:** How useful are post consultation letters to patients?

**Version:** 1  **Date:** 17 October 2005

**Reviewer:** Ann-Louise Caress

**Reviewer's report:**

General

This paper reports on an interesting and pragmatic study which relates to a topic which has wide interest/relevance and which addresses a current policy issue. The background section is very brief, but provides some pertinent information and cites appropriate sources. The study design is appropriate to the research questions asked. The data collection methods used are sound and appropriate. There is no specific mention of how analysis was undertaken, but this appears to have been appropriate. Results are generally presented acceptably, though there is some unnecessary duplication of material in tables and text. The discussion is brief, but generally appropriate, with some pertinent and interesting points made. Some material at the start of the discussion might sit better in the results section. The conclusions are appropriate and do not unduly speculate beyond the findings. There are some sound practice recommendations made. Referencing is appropriate and pertinent sources are utilised.

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

None

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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)**

Methods

Information re how many patients were approached and how many consented should be in Results, not Methods, section.

Need a brief mention of the approach used for quantitative data analysis and also need to reference the Flesch score/Flesch-Kincaid level. Was there any specific methodological approach used for the thematic analysis? If so, you may want to insert a reference (eg to Miles and Huberman, Silverman, Guba and Lincoln or whomever).

Results

Section 1 - It is not necessary to repeat data from the table in the text (and the table is easier to follow anyway). Also, you need to report the test statistic (and degrees of freedom where pertinent) as well as the p-value when presenting inferential statistics.

Section 1 line 8 - delete "in length" after "longer"
Section 2 - title missing apostrophe on Patients', also line 1 should read "compared with" not "compared to"

Section 3 line 1 - should read "one", not "1" (use words for numbers less than 10).

Section 3 lines 3-4 - suggest you insert comma after (rather than before) "and" L3 and then one after "practice" L4 to increase clarity

Section 3, para 3, line 1 - need to clarify which letters you're referring to here (presumably the patient's). 

Section 3, para 3, line 2 - "extra time involved" - for them or for the consultants (ie in reading or in preparing/dictating). Needs clarification. Also need to change "5 GPs" to "Five GPs"

"What this study has found" boxes - last item is a recommendation, not a finding (and is repeated in recommendations). Need to find an alternative.

Table 3 Title - GPs' not GP's.

Table 3 - are terminology and missing information the same or should these be two separate categories?

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Methods - last sentence re ethics committee approval - might sit better nearer the start of the section (even as first sentence) 

The study was conducted using consultant letters and these experienced clinicians appeared readily able to produce GP-focused and patient-focused letters. The skills in producing these two types of letter appear to be a little different. Is there therefore a training issue, especially for more junior doctors and does this merit comment in your discussion. Just a thought.

Results - Section 3. Did you ask patients the equivalent of the question to GPs re which letter would be preferred if they could only have one? If so, would be interesting data to report.

Discussion - first three lines are really findings, not discussion and so might sit better in "Results"

Table 3 - Suggest putting something like "missing/inadequate" after "diagnosis/drug therapy" and "medical summary" to increase clarity. Also suggest you give one or two examples of "other" category

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
Prof Partridge and I are collaborating on an unrelated project. However, I have not had any involvement in this project and this is the first time I have seen the data, so I do not feel there is any conflict of interest. Answer to all other questions in "No".