Reviewer's report

Title: Comparison of early-, late-, and non-participants in a school-based asthma management program for urban high school students

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Reviewer: Lynn Gerald

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This manuscript compares characteristics of early, late, and non-participants in a school-based asthma management program for urban high school students. While the manuscript provides some interesting information, the discussion is not well developed. In addition, additional information regarding some aspects of the trial are necessary.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The abstract states that “data” was analyzed for participants, non-participants, and late-participants. This needs to be better detailed.

2. The last statement of the abstract is unclear. “Investigators must weight external validity against exceptional follow-up.” What is meant by “exceptional follow-up”?

3. The background provides little information for the context of this analysis. The investigators state that the descriptions of early, late, and non-participants can be used to refine recruitment approaches. How can this be done? The investigators also state that these descriptions are particularly important when recruiting from challenging populations such as urban adolescents. Why is this so? Why is recruiting urban adolescents particularly challenging?

4. In the methods section, the authors state that during the intervention “research staff continued some recruitment activities”. What does this mean? Earlier it was stated that recruitment was done by a contract organization. This is not clear and needs more explanation.

5. The investigators mention some extrinsic motivation factors such as “undue pressure or coercion”. If these occurred during recruitment activities, this would be a violation of IRB standards.

6. The recruitment rate was very low for this trial. Only 422 out of 1668 eligible students enrolled. Why was the rate so low? Did this meet the goals for the clinical trial?

7. The investigators mention incentives were used to recruit and retain participants but do not expand on what type. This needs more explanation.

8. The discussion is poorly written and does not provide adequate context for the analysis/findings. The authors compare their results to “two German studies of youth” – what types of studies? Why not compare to other respiratory studies as well? The authors then speculate that the fact that a higher percentage of
late-participants were male is due to a “subgroup in denial or reluctant to reveal that they have asthma”. Why would the investigators hypothesize this? More detail and explanation for this statement is required. Maybe young males are just more reluctant to join a study or respond better to “peer request” to join. The investigators state that “Recruitment of urban teens to a RCT proved challenging.” However, there are no details provided to support this statement – why was recruitment challenging? Why was the enrollment rate so low? Little is explained about recruitment methods so these statements are difficult to evaluate. The discussion needs substantial revision and expansion. It is cursory and does not provide an adequate context for the results.

9. The conclusion does not follow from the information presented. Why do the investigators state that “messages were successful in attracting those students struggling with asthma control”? There was no evidence presented to support this statement. The conclusion needs substantial revision.

Minor Essential Revisions

None

Discretionary Revisions

1. Abstract: Last sentence of the background is confusing and should be reworded. In the results section, would suggest saying “ORs were elevated for the association of late-participation “with” Medicaid enrollment (instead of “to”).

2. Background: “The goal of this paper is to describe the characteristics of participants and non-participants for “a” (instead of the) randomized trial”. Would also include the grant number here.

**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:**

Yes, I have received NIH funding.