Reviewer's report

Title: Stepped care treatment for depression and anxiety in primary care: A randomized controlled trial

Version: 2 Date: 16 May 2011

Reviewer: Philip Batterham

Reviewer's report:

The article reports on an RCT comparing a stepped care model of depression and anxiety treatment to treatment as usual. Although the trial did not find a difference between the two conditions, it is important that new models of treatment such as stepped care are investigated to improve the effectiveness of treatment for depression and anxiety. Some suggestions for improving the manuscript are detailed below.

Major compulsory revisions

1) The treatment of missing data is not particularly clear. "Missing data were imputed using regression imputation..." – does this mean single imputation? Why not use multiple imputation? Or why impute at all, since there is no clear need for imputation given the analyses used?

2) GEE is not robust to missingness (see Rotnitzky & Wypij, Biometrics 1994; Paik, J Am Stat Assoc, 1997), producing biased estimates when there are missing data. Please explain why mixed effects logit models (e.g., xtlogit in Stata, glimmix in SAS) were not used instead.

Minor essential revisions

3) Please include page numbers.

4) Abstract: "...there was no statistical significant..." should be "statistically significant"

5) Intro: "...and not later or less intense..." should be "intensely"

6) Intro: "In a stepped care model, all patients start with an evidence-based treatment..." – do all patients receive treatment or only those patients exhibiting symptoms of depression/anxiety?

7) Intro: "...and where necessary changes are made" – delete "where"

8) Method: April and May should be capitalised

9) Method: "...all participants gave, written,..." – delete the comma after "gave"

10) Method: "...few studies who report..." – change to "that report"

11) Method: "...detect clinical relevant..." – should be "clinically"

12) Method, results and throughout: please ensure that past tense is used when describing the study and the results of the study. For example, "The first is a generic intervention...", "It is primarily aimed at helping people to understand the
techniques which are offered in the course.

If the patient experiences extreme dysfunctioning, "But there is no significant difference..." – these and many other examples should all be in past tense.

13) Method: Missing punctuation: "based on problem solving treatment Patients"

14) Method: Consider using gender neutral language, "...he/she was directed immediately to the fourth step..."

15) Method: "GEE is taking into account..." should be "GEE takes into account..."

16) Method: "...the percentages of patients who have recovered..." – consider deleting "have"

17) Results: "...were referred to specialized mental health care after they run through..." – add "had" before "run"

18) Results: It is not clear what the estimates listed in the treatment effect paragraphs refer to: "(B=31.17..." and "(B=10.30..." – are these the effects of time or the interaction effects or something else? They seem to be significant as the CIs do not include zero.

19) Discussion: consider replacing "is outperforming" with "outperformed" in the first sentence.

20) Discussion: consider replacing "suffered" with "received" in the second sentence.

21) Discussion: "...care as usual have a, on average, mild to moderate symptom level, but because of the small change over time and the high number of still existing diagnosis at the end of the study suggests that we included..." – suggest changing to "...care as usual have, on average, mild to moderate symptom levels, but the small change in symptoms over time and the high number of existing diagnoses at the end of the study suggest that we included..."

22) Discussion: The second paragraph is very long. Considering starting new paragraphs at "Patients with relatively mild symptoms..." and "Our suggestion to improve the model..."

23) Discussion: "...the freedom of choice for feedback has probably lead..." – consider changing to "...may have led..."

24) Discussion: "...adherence to the self-help course guidance by..." – add a comma after "course"

25) Discussion: What effect did the reminders have on adherence or treatment effects? For example, did the authors examine differences to those who received all of their reminders to those who did not?

26) Discussion: "...and it is easy accessible for patients." – change to easily.

27) Table 1: decimal places should be consistent, i.e., p = 1.00 instead of 1.0.

Discretionary revisions

28) Discussion: The study examined stepped care for treating depression/anxiety. The authors could comment on whether such an approach might work better for the prevention (rather than treatment) of
depression/anxiety, particularly since many of the participants in the study had chronic conditions.

29) **Discussion:** Further evidence for the chronicity of depression in the study sample can be seen in that the mean age of the sample is 50 years but the mean age of onset is 28, apparently suggesting an average 22 year chronicity.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

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

**Statistical review:** Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests