Reviewer’s report

Title: Effectiveness of a cognitive behavioural therapy based rehabilitation programme (the Progressive Goal Attainment Programme) for patients who are work-disabled due to back pain: Study protocol for a multi centre randomised controlled trial.

Version: 1 Date: 4 June 2013

Reviewer: Sean Perrin

Reviewer’s report:

1. Will the study design adequately test the hypothesis?

This is a well-designed study with no gross threats to its internal or external validity. It is also an important study that is likely to have an impact on the field and public health policy.

2. Are sufficient details provided to allow replication of the work or comparison with related analyses: if not, what is missing?

The description of the trial methodology would benefit from additional description of the exclusion criteria. In particular, the authors need to describe what constitutes "serious cognitive or psychiatric disorder"? How will these conditions be measured?

Patients who are undergoing some other form of psychological treatment for pain are excluded from the trial prior to randomization. What if a patient in the MTAU-only condition enrols in a psychological treatment for pain during the time they are in the trial? Are they told they cannot do so? Are they then excluded? More information would be helpful.

It appears that analgesic medication (alongside other medication use) is measured throughout the trial and in both conditions but this should be made explicit. Does the exclusion criteria of "serious psychiatric disorder" include substance (particularly analgesic/opioid abuse) and/or alcohol misuse/abuse. Please specify. Are any instructions given to the GP prior to either treatment to maintain the patient on stable medication dosage or not to prescribe a "new" dose or new medication. Patients are prescribed a wide variety of medications with dual usage that are believed to have beneficial effects on pain. Are there any medications (e.g. psychiatric medications prescribed for pain and not mental health problems) whose use by the patient would cause exclusion from the trial?

The authors have a stratification plan to insure relatively equal numbers of patients from each of the treatment centres (rightly). I think the reader might find it helpful to hear why the authors did not choose to stratify on any other variables, i.e. pain severity/duration/onset, duration of disability or total number of months off work, prior treatment history etc.
3. Is the planned statistical analysis appropriate?
The planned statistics are appropriate and the target recruitment sufficiently powerful to address the main hypotheses.

4. Is the writing acceptable?
The manuscript is well-written (concise, free of error, clear).