Reviewer's report

Title: Practical health co-operation - a cluster randomised study protocol: The impact of a referral template on quality of care and health care co-operation

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Reviewer: Moyez Jiwa

Reviewer's report:

I enjoyed reading this paper which tackles a challenging research question- namely can we demonstrate a link between 'patient care' and the quality of information relayed at the interface between primary care and specialist services.

I have a fundamental problem with how this trial has been presented- the authors appear to hypothesize that if specific details are relayed at the interface, then patient care, which appears to be defined in terms of diagnosis and treatment as well as patient satisfaction will be improved. However the reasons for referral from primary care are many- at the simplest level the GP may be hoping for a diagnosis or even for treatment of a specific pathology. However there is a complexity beyond this which may not be acknowledged or assessed in this study. This includes reassurance of patient and practitioner, to off load a difficult patient with somatic symptoms, to reduce medicolegal risk or simply for a second opinion. This may not satisfy the patient, it may appear as a waste of specialist time but it may serve a very important function for the primary care practitioner. There is a risk that although the proportion of patients who would benefit within a medical model may increase by this intervention, it may also discourage referral of patients with functional conditions who may also benefit from a specialist input. Also for many of the conditions likely to be referred in this study there is a very tenuous link between symptoms and pathology- for example patients referred for a colonoscopy, although most will be symptomatic the majority have very minor if any pathology. In sum I suspect that this protocol is led by a team with a very limited understanding of general practice.

In terms of framing this study there are many issues that were not tackled in the manuscript as presented:

1. Are GPs gatekeepers to secondary care services in Norway? Please describe the health care system briefly for an international readership.
2. To what extent can we be reassured that the practices and patients in this locality are typical of the rest of the country?

Major compulsory revisions
1. The authors are advised to review their references in particular- 
   a. what is reference 4?
   b. Reference 6 refers to conference proceedings- there are many other more
suitable references available in the literature.
c. Please review all references as some of these do not appear to say what is
being stated in the text- are you sure you have read all the cited references?
d. The presentation of reference 19 is sloppy.

2. There is no mention of a pilot study- why? How do we know the intervention is
acceptable in practice or that the data can be collected? How did you calculate
the effect size?

3. How is the "collated quality indicator score" calculated? This is not clear from
the text.

4. 855 per group is a very large number of referred patients- are you sure you will
achieve this sample size? Why? How can you be confident on this point.

5. The paragraph on samples size calculation beginning: "No intracluster
correlation coefficient..." is not very clear.

6. The scoring system is described as simple. Please explain.

7. In the discussion what were the findings of the study cited as [47]?

Minor essential revision
There are a number of grammatical errors throughout the text.

Discretionary revisions:
I suggest a flow chart demonstrating how patients will be recruited may be
helpful.

Level of interest: An article of limited interest

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

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the
statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

No competing interests