Reviewer’s report

Title: Obstacles to recruitment in paediatric studies focusing on mental health in a physical health context: The experiences of clinical gatekeepers in an observational cohort study

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Reviewer: Iben Axen

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this interesting manuscript. Let me just say that I am not an expert in qualitative methods, and my comments should be viewed in the light of this fact.

Introduction:

I think that some reference to recruitment difficulties in other medical research areas would broaden the scope of your article. While generalizability is difficult, I think there are common problems across most (all) research involving humans, definitely in different clinical settings.

Methods:

Please explain what "a realist perspective" and "a semantic level" means for your analysis. While I understand the words, it is not clear how these perspectives influence your analysis.

Results:

In quantitative research, it is common to describe the participants. Here, we only know their occupation. What about age, gender, years of experience? This is very much a convenience sample, but is it not desirable in qualitative research to purposely sample the target population to get a diverse data-material? Maybe it would be a good idea to let the reader know if your sample was very homogenous or not.

The identified themes seems (again, to an inexperienced reader) to be direct results from your interview themes. I.e. it seems to me these originated because you asked about them in the interview.

I have a problem with your subtheme 1: clinical context. This is described as a challenging time for the patient, not being well, getting a stigmatized diagnosis and realizing that this will affect their health. However, most of this is true for all clinical encounters. I think you are implying
that these patients were more vulnerable than most? As such, I think re-naming the theme would make it clearer. Is it rather the fact that we are dealing with mental health?

The same goes for your subtheme 3b): content of the study. This is described as perceptions of mental health, which has nothing to do with the study. The fact that the study questions are of a sensitive nature, is again not content, but maybe just the topic of mental health?

I think it would be useful with a table for the recommendations of how to support recruitment. These points are to me, the real gem of your work, as these findings may apply to other areas of clinical research.

Discussion:

You are not discussing the setting- NHS. Do you think that the findings would have been similar in the private health sector? In other parts of the UK?

Do you think that the "mode" of interview affected your results? Will you speak more frankly on the phone or face-to-face?

I think your suggestions on how to improve recruitment are very good, and may be used in many other research settings. Specifically, I think bringing gatekeepers in at the design stage is very important. However, remember that this study is only studying these clinicians. It is their perception that patients find the study questions sensitive, not the patients. As an example, health care personnel believe that talking about alcohol use/misuse is sensitive, but for patients, it is not.

Further, clinicians' suggestions may not always be feasible or congruent with the necessary research design. One example of this is the suggestion of having flexible inclusion visits, which could be elaborated on.

I am not sure what you mean by indicating that participating in research could lead to a worsening of mental health. Please elaborate. In pain research, the opposite seems to be the case.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

No
Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

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