Reviewer’s report

Title: Indigenous traumatic brain injury research: Responding to recruitment challenges in the hospital environment

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Reviewer: Tatyana Mollayeva

Reviewer's report:

Fitt's et al.'s perspective for performing their research "Indigenous traumatic brain injury research: Responding to recruitment challenges in the hospital environment" was that clinical and rehabilitation environments can create unique challenges to recruit research participants. As such, researchers described and reflected on the specific challenges they encountered when recruiting indigenous participants with traumatic brain injury, at 2 tertiary hospitals in Northern Australia. Researchers utilized data from three sources, qualitative records summarizing research staff contact with patients, family members, clinical service providers, and field trip notes. It appears that by recruiting participants researchers wanted to understand cognitive health, well-being and recovery of indigenous participants with traumatic brain injury during 6 months from hospital to home discharge. By doing so, they encountered challenges during recruitment process, including those concerning discharge against medical advice (AMA), the need to apply the Westmead post-traumatic amnesia (PTA) scale by clinical staff to determine the capacity of patients with TBI to consent to the research, restricting ability of patients under adult guardianship and difficulty to coordinate research around patients commitments and treatment, to get involved in research. Researchers concluded that in order to maximize recruitment and reduce ethics amendment during the research program, it is important to develop a simplified recruitment protocol and employ hospital staff as research officers.

According to researchers' description, their original recruitment strategy was a three-step program: 1) a nominated health staff member identified eligible patient and notified the research team; 2) a research team member approached the patient to explain the study and provide an information sheet; 3) once consent form was obtained (i.e., prior to that patients had to be emerged from PTA, assessed by the Westmead PTA scale) and assessment completed (unclear what was involved in this assessment, participants were asked to nominate a caregiver or significant other to participate in the study.

It seems like the recruitment for the main study was purposive, i.e., deliberate selection of participants who were indigenous and experienced hospitalization due to TBI. It seems like recruitment took place at two hospital, settings and the sample may be representative of people of varying injury severity and mechanisms, as well as their significant others. It is difficult to
comment on the age distribution, sex, and well as severity of injury in men and women with TBI, and the structure and characteristics of their family members, as this information was not presented. Likewise, personal characteristics, credentials, experience and training of research personnel was not presented. This observation points to the high likelihood of sampling issues, raising the concern of potential inadequate exposure of researchers to recruitment phenomena, and thus questionable potential to generalizability of conclusions made.

Below are methodology-related comments that need to be presented:

1) What theoretical framework was in place when designing this research?

2) Did participants provide feedback or commented on the study research objective? findings?

3) How many participants (patients with TBI, family member, etc.) were in the study? How many you were planned to recruit and how many have been recruited? Number of interviews, focus groups, fields notes, etc.

4) What are the important characteristics of the sample? e.g. demographic and injury-related data, clinical data, etc.

5) What are the important personal characteristics, credentials, experience and training of research personnel, including cultural competence about indigenous people values, power relationships between them and research personnel? research and clinical personnel at two hospital sites?

6) Were field notes made during and/or after participants' recruitment?

7) Provide the data analysis steps of results that were reported.

8) Describe how you dealt with private information, potential biases of a researcher, participants who provided consent but left AMA, participants without family members or significant other, and patients with language problems?

This descriptive study is very important because it described challenges researchers faced when recruited indigenous people with head injury at the early stages after the injury. However, researchers' conclusion, about the need of simplification of the recruitment process, is difficult to accept as evidence-based, taking into account that researchers did not report on important characteristics of key groups (indigenous people with TBI, their family members, research personnel, ethics board members), that can affect or be affected by the research program
described in this research. The presence of decision-making capacity, is not only an essential element of valid consent, but also involves law relating to consent, where there are clear legal consequences, if the researcher acts in its absence. Overlapping or multiple relationships (researcher-practitioner and research participant, as proposed by researchers) can become by itself the major source of ethical conflicts faced by research team. Therefore, to be in the position to accept any change proposed by researchers, the reader needs to be provided with an information of each party needs, interests, and values, to detect the very target root cause that influenced recruitment process. It might turn out, that recruitment at hospital discharge or when people are discharged to community, will suit better research focused to understand outcomes of indigenous people with TBI.

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

No

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

Unable to assess

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?**
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

No

**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

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

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