Reviewer's report

Title: A qualitative exploration of the use of calendar landmarking instruments in cancer symptom research

Version: 1 Date: 22 April 2014

Reviewer: Claire Balmer

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for sending the above manuscript which describes an succinct, easily applied and effective method of assisting patients to recall events such as the onset of symptoms and presentation to a health professional. I read it with interest and can envisage its usefulness in the clinical setting.

I recommend four discretionary revisions:

1 Throughout the document, the authors refer to ‘time to diagnosis’ (lines 45-46). However, ‘time to presentation’ may be a more accurate term as the authors are only investigating this phase (rather than investigating delay from presentation to diagnosis.

2 Under ‘factors affecting usefulness of calendar landmarking instruments’, the authors explain that it was difficult for participants to characterise and disentangle symptoms when they were similar to other diseases. However, under ‘comparison with existing literature’, they say that calendar landmarking may be of particular use when vague or episodic symptoms are experienced. This may need more explanation to avoid appearing contradictory.

3 ‘Principle findings’ would benefit from some more clarification. For example, the authors suggest that landmarks often contributed to refinement of first symptom onset and led participants to re-visit their symptom appraisal and decisional factors. However, the authors do not offer examples or explanation of this.

4 It would be useful to discuss whether landmarking may be useful in all cancer sites (perhaps with often vague symptoms, such as ovarian cancer) as the authors have already said that these participants found it difficult to disentangle symptoms and they used data exploring only 5 cancer sites.

I also recommend four minor essential revisions:

1 Results (line 17) please remove additional word ‘patients’.

2 Background (line 41) please remove additional word ‘a’.

3 Factors affecting usefulness (line 232) please remove ‘in both Australia and England’ as this is confusing when applied to the bank holidays in England described before (i.e. it is doubtful Australians would landmark with bank holidays specific to England).

4 Please be consistent in use of capital letters (e.g. line 19 and 231). N.B. bank holiday does not usually require capitals.
Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.