Author’s response to reviews

Title: Patients’ experiences of living with medically unexplained symptoms (MUS): A qualitative study.

Authors:

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Version: 2 Date: 29 Aug 2017

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AUTHORS' RESPONSES TO EDITORIAL AND REVIEWERS' COMMENTS:

1. We note that you state that patients agreed to participate in the study and to be filmed on condition that they would remain fully anonymous. Please can yo clarify whether the patients wanted to remain anonymous in the published data or whether they also wanted to remain anonymous from the researchers themselves as we note that it is the patients’ GPs who conducted the interviews. If the patients wanted to remain anonymous from the researchers please can you clarify what measures were put in place to ensure anonymity.

We have added the following in the Methods section (on page 4):

"The patients gave their written informed consent to participate in the study and to be filmed, on condition that they would remain fully anonymous. They wanted to remain anonymous in the published data, and to be interviewed by the doctor they had known well and whom they trusted, refusing to be interviewed by anyone else."

2. We note that you state that the patients’ doctors interviewed them (page 10, line 50) however, on page 11, line 11 you state that the interviews were conducted by the second author SC. Please can you clarify whether SC was the doctor of the patients.
This has been clarified in the Methods section (on page 5) in the following way:

"The interviews were conducted by the second author (SC), who was the only interviewing researcher and the family doctor of the majority of the patients, according to the topic guide derived from the literature on MUS [30], shown in Table 1."

3. We note that you state that the interview questions were pilot tested. Please can you clarify if the patients were filmed during pilot testing and whether you obtained informed consent, written or verbal, from the participants involved in pilot testing. If the need for consent was waived by an IRB or is deemed unnecessary according to national regulations, please clearly state this, including the name of the IRB or a reference to the relevant legislation. Please can you also clarify whether you required ethics approval to conduct pilot testing and if so please clearly state the name of the ethics committee who approved your pilot test. If the need for ethics approval was waived by an IRB or is deemed unnecessary according to national regulations, please clearly state this, including the name of the IRB or a reference to the relevant legislation.

Ethical approval of the entire research plan, including conducting a pilot test, was granted by the Ethical Commission on 14 September 2014. One patient was audiotaped and one was filmed. Their written informed consent was obtained. We have added the following information in the Methods section (on page 5):

"To ensure the patients' understanding, the interview questions were pilot tested with two patients with MUS, in 2014. Ethical approval of the study's research plan, including pilot testing, was granted by the Bioethical Commission of the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Doctors Chamber in Torun, Poland, in September 2014."

4. In the Ethics approval and consent to participate section please clarify whether written or verbal informed consent was obtained from the participants. If verbal, please state the reason and whether the ethics committee approved this procedure.

This has been clarified in the following way:
"All participants were provided with information about the study and gave their written informed consent."

5. In the Consent for publication section please provide a statement regarding whether patients gave consent, written or verbal, for their anonymised quotes to be included in the manuscript.

In the Consent for publication section we have added the following statement:

"The patients gave verbal consent for their anonymised quotes to be included in the manuscript."

6. Please provide a list of all the abbreviations used in the manuscript. This list should be placed just before the Declarations section. All abbreviations should still be defined in the text at first use.

A list of all the abbreviations used in the manuscript has been placed before the Declarations section.

7. Unfortunately Tables 1 and 2 contain too many indirect identifiers which compromise the anonymity of the patients. It is our policy to not publish more than 2 indirect identifiers without consent for publication from participants. We therefore suggest removing these tables and providing this information as a summary in the manuscript text instead.

Following the suggestion, the tables have been removed and summarised information about the patients has been provided in the manuscript text in the Methods section on page 4. The following sentences have been added:

"The mean age of the interviewees was 37.4 years."

"There were fourteen patients with higher education, six with secondary education, and some patients were highly educated and held prestigious jobs."

"Their major symptoms included: headaches, backpain, muscle pain, chest pain, abdominal pain, blackouts, oversweating, palpitations, blurred vision, fatigue, shortness of breath and dizziness."
8. We note that in the system the corresponding author’s email is listed as ‘agnessis@gmail.com’ whereas in the title page of the manuscript it is listed as ‘sowinska@umk.pl’. Please provide an explanation for this and ensure that the corresponding author’s email address in the system and the manuscript is identical.

The email address in the system has been corrected.