Reviewer's report

Title: Care of the Human Spirit and the Role of Dignity Therapy: A Review of Dignity Therapy Research

Version: 1 Date: 13 December 2014

Reviewer: Alexia Torke

Reviewer's report:

Powell
For editors:
For Authors
This is a well-written systematic review of an important topic for palliative care, the impact of dignity therapy interventions on patient (and family) outcomes. It is an important contribution to the literature. The authors have been thoughtful in their approach and conclusions.

Major compulsory revisions:
My one major comment is that the authors do not reference standard and widely accepted approaches for systematic reviews. At least referencing the PRISMA guidelines and adhering to them as much as possible in your report would strengthen the manuscript (http://www.prisma-statement.org/). Also cite these guidelines. A few specific elements of the PRISMA checklist that you should explicitly state are the eligibility criteria for the studies, using the PICOS framework plus any other elements, and some statement of the risk of bias within and across studies (at least make a comment on this in the manuscript text, if you did not extract data elements related to this). It would also be helpful to include a standard flow diagram for article selection, if space allows.

Minor essential revision
Selection criteria
P 5 para 2
You state “we” conducted a two stage review. Who did the review? Did all authors review all articles or just one of you? Please be transparent about this.

Results page 5 para 3
The sentence “one of which occurred in a sample that was not involved…” would be clearer if stated in the positive: “Four of which included data from the quantitative studies.”

Page 6 para 3:
I don’t understand the first sentence, beginning, “regarding the quantitative studies.” What study doesn’t use primary and secondary outcomes? Not sure of your point here.
Page 7 effectiveness
This section is really important and needs a lot of editing for clarity.
The first sentence does not make sense to me. Your review is supposed to be addressing the published evidence. And furthermore there is some, albeit weak, evidence for effectiveness.
I recommend organizing this section first by type of finding, first the pre/post results that were significant, then the intervention/control results that were significant. Then discuss key methods issues, such as power.
The last sentence before the Discussion is unclear. Higher levels of meaning in life, etc than what? Than previous scores or the other group?

Discussion
Page 8 para3 The sentence beginning “this conclusion is critical” is really hard to follow. Could you just state that at this point there is only weak and limited evidence of the effectiveness of DT?
Then discuss the measurement issues, where are numerous and include perhaps choosing the wrong outcomes, the need for delayed measurement and power issues.

Page 9 para 2
This seems to come out of the blue. I know the authors have an interest in the spiritual component of DT, but right now this feels like a digression. Consider relating this more closely to your review and shortening it.

Conclusion
You are right to state that efficacy is lacking in the one adequately powered study, but it is worth mentioning which smaller studies did find effects and specifically what they were.

Table 1
This is a clear and useful table. Please be consistent in providing p values for significant findings such as Hall et al (31,32,35) and Juliano et al.
For Hall et al (34, 35), I am not sure which measure you are referring to as “reduced dignity related distress”

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

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