Reviewer’s report

Title: Social workers' involvement in advance care planning: a systematic narrative review

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Reviewer: Brian Taylor

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Reviewer Comments for BMC Palliative Care 29 May 2017 on: Social workers' involvement in advance care planning: a systematic review of peer-reviewed publications.

1. Clarity of purpose and title

It is pleasing to see an initiative to undertake a rigorous literature review on a topic relevant to social work knowledge and skills, and also one that goes beyond a question of effectiveness.

The title of the manuscript is generally accurate although I would retain the term 'systematic review' for a literature review that has a robust, transparent and justifiable methodology for all three stages: (1) literature searching; (2) quality criteria for inclusion; and (3) synthesis. This review has a reasonably transparent methodology for the study identification stage only, so I would use the term 'systematic narrative review', which is now becoming used more widely in this context (see eg. Best, Manktelow et al. 2014; Killick & Taylor, 2009; McGinn et al. in press) although the phrase 'systematic search and narrative review' is also used (Hagan et al. 2014). Acceptable terminology for this needs to be worked through the abstract and main text also.

2. Originality and Contribution to Knowledge

This paper adds to our understanding of the social work role in relation to Advance Care Planning and Advance Directives. The findings from the various studies reviewed as summarised in the tables will be a valuable source of reference, although some restructuring of this is recommended (see below).

3. Context

The meaning of Advance Care Planning and Advance Directives is clearly explained. The context of social workers needing to be more knowledgeable about Advance Care Planning and Advance Directives is well argued. It is pleasing to see the linkage from social work to the global
health agenda. The authors have done well to bring this to submission stage so quickly after the completion date (December 2016) of the literature searches.

4. Quality of Methods and Results

The method is reasonably clearly explained in parts and the design is appropriate. The range of databases searched (PubMed, Web of Science, AMED, CINAHL, SocINDEX, and PsychINFO) seems reasonable. The exclusion of Medline needs to be justified in the context of a rigorous search on this topic. This is presumably because PubMed is deemed as using the same abstract collection. The description of the search strategy is simply a list of terms. To be able to appraise rigour it is essential that the structure of the search is presented also in terms of the concept groupings (see e.g. Best, Taylor et al. 2014; Campbell et al. in press; McGinn et al. 2016; Stevenson et al. 2016). If a librarian or information scientist assisted in constructing the search this could be mentioned in the text as well as the name appearing in Acknowledgements.

Whilst the exclusion of items that are not original reports of research findings is very appropriate, the wording: 'Nonoriginal publications such as editorials, commentaries, …' (p 6, L 33) is unclear. The authors of most editorials and commentaries would probably regard their material as original! The exclusion of literature reviews is sound, but the reviewers should indicate (1) why their own review is worth carrying out if there are existing literature reviews, and (2) what use was made of these literature reviews. For example were the studies reviewed by these previous literature reviews considered for inclusion in this review?

Some reference to quality criteria for inclusion should be included. What would be lost if the grey literature were omitted? This would enable the words 'peer reviewed' or 'peer-reviewed empirical research papers' to be used as a quality criterion. If grey literature is included some explicit quality approval mechanism should be used for these by the review team (eg using tools such as in Taylor et al. 2015).

The process of getting from study identification to synthesis is helpfully outlined.

It would be helpful if the categories used for analysis ('The included studies were categorized according to the types of study design, samples, and research themes…'; P 7, L 4-6) were included in the Methods section with a brief explanation and justification. In particular the justification for classification by research design needs to be clearly referenced to an appropriate source. The category of 'intervention studies' is clear enough, and experimental and quasi-experimental designs are clearly appropriate to this. A further classification into studies exploring people's experiences and seeking to build theoretical understandings (for which qualitative studies are ideally suited) and studies of prevalence and correlation (for which surveys are suited) would seem the obvious categories (Taylor et al. 2015). I can see a rationale for 'comparative studies' as a title if there are many surveys that actually measure comparisons of
interest. However the single qualitative study within this category (Black, 2006) seems out of place.

Table 1 is titled as 'descriptive studies' that include only social workers, whereas Table 2 is titled as 'comparative studies' that include other respondents. Were there no comparative studies that included only social workers, such as working in different settings? The problem I think is that the phrase 'descriptive studies' is used (P 7, L 26) with no explanation as to what this means. Some people use this term (or the equally unhelpful term 'observational') to mean any study that is not a randomised controlled trial. I suggest omitting this label as it is usually used in a pejorative sense, and adds nothing to our understanding. It would be cleaner and clearer to stick to basic descriptions such as 'qualitative', 'survey' (or 'cross-sectional survey' if preferred), 'experimental', 'quasi-experimental', 'case-control', 'cohort', etc. which have clearer and useful definitions (see Taylor et al. 2015 for a discussion of the use of such terms in social work). Perhaps 'studies of people's experiences in their own words' or 'studies to create conceptual understandings' is what is meant by 'descriptive' here.

The structuring of the data extraction into three separate tables suggests that the review started out with three distinct questions. If so this should be clarified at an earlier stage as the purpose of the review. One option is that it might be better not to classify the papers into these three separate tables at all, but simply to report on themes within the synthesis with reference to a single list of all included studies that combines the current Tables 1, 2 and 3. This would avoid classifying Black (2006) in a list of 'comparative studies' just because it seems to be claiming to undertake a comparative study whilst using a qualitative design! You could then simply comment within the synthesis on the misfit between the design and the purpose of this study without listing this as a 'comparative' study. However I can see some merit in the separate lists.

It would be helpful if the Table of included studies indicated also the country where the study was undertaken. This could be included in the first column under the first author and date without requiring an additional column. A paragraph within the synthesis summarising general differences and similarities between countries (and continents as desired) would be useful.

In the interests of transparency and to educate others considering a similar review, it would be helpful if there could be some mention in the Methods section about the approach to synthesis [cf. 'The findings of these studies can be classified into six categories (Table 4)' (P8, L 15-17)], although I recognise the challenges in this for a narrative synthesis.

Ethical approval was not required for this as a literature review. The data appear sound.

5. Discussion and Conclusions
The limitations of the study are clearly stated at the start of the Discussion section, although some of the text (P 14, L 30-46) should be reconsidered.

* 'Second, study quality was not ranked for the included studies due to the heterogeneity of research designs.' - This is fine; attempting to rank quality is a subjective and fraught exercise even with homogeneous study designs!

* 'Interpretation and generalization of the results should be cautious due to the small sample size, non-random sampling procedures and lack of controls in some of the included studies.' - Non-random sampling is not an essential weakness in relation to qualitative studies [which primarily require 'information-rich' respondents]. Nor is it clear why lack of controls is a weakness in relation to surveys or qualitative studies [it is hard to imaging their relevance to the type of questions to which qualitative and survey designs are appropriate]! This is applying criteria for studies of effectiveness (of a planned intervention) to study designs suited to (and hopefully usually used for!) quite different types of research questions (see comments above). There are specific quality criteria that could be applied to these specific types of research (in relation to particular purposes, as above, see Taylor et al. 2015). However the quality criterion of being masked peer-reviewed is one quality criterion that can be applied readily across study designs, which is why it is worth considering excluding the studies that do not meet this standard.

The argument is logically constructed and balanced in general. However the conclusions sometimes seem to go beyond the data in the studies reviewed. In general the manuscript needs to be read through to ensure that international generalisation is not made from contextual information specific to the location of the authors. Also messages from individual studies need to be handled with caution in terms of drawing conclusions across countries and continents. Is this a topic where there might be differences between states within USA? This is not to say that there cannot be any comment contrasting, for example, differences between Australasia, Europe and North America. However the message should be more finely nuanced in relation to the evidence available which is partial in relation to generalising across whole countries and continents.

6. Organisation of manuscript

The manuscript is well-structured. In particular the reporting of the number of hits and the process of narrowing down to those that are relevant is well positioned at the start of the Results section.

7. Abstract and Keywords
The abstract needs to be reworded to recognise a tighter definition of 'systematic review'. In particular the phrase 'systematic and comprehensive synthesis' seems inappropriate. The synthesis is a 'narrative synthesis'; it is difficult to see how it is 'systematic' (there is no methodology given for the synthesis) and the 'comprehensiveness' relates to study identification, not the synthesis. The whole review might be described as 'comprehensive' as it is based on a transparent and probably robust search process [see comment above re reporting on search structure].

It would be preferable if abbreviations were not used in the abstract. It is pleasing to note that the date range of the databases searched is in the abstract as well as in the main text. It would be helpful if a reference to a quality criterion for inclusion could be worked in to the abstract even if just by adding the words 'peer reviewed' or 'peer-reviewed empirical research papers' or similar. The wording 'Given insufficient knowledge and insufficient educational preparation of...' is clumsy and may be challenged in terms of generalizability across countries. The wording suggests that this is a problem in every country of the world, which is not demonstrated by the literature reviewed, even if every paper reviewed reports a problem!

8. Quality of writing, referencing & visual material

The quality of writing and referencing is generally good although there are occasional phrases, such as 'papers or theses having examined by reviewers' (p 6, L 32) and the title of Table 1 (Summary of descriptive studies that included social workers merely) which indicate that proof reading by a native English speaker is required.

The term 'multiple disciplinary' (presumably meaning 'multi-disciplinary') professionals is used (p24, L 20) although it is not clear that all respondents in the study were qualified in more than one profession. The work that they do together might be described as 'multi-disciplinary' (or better as 'multi-professional' to encompass the concepts of different organisational and regulatory arrangements as well as distinct knowledge bases), but the individuals are rarely 'multi-professional' (although some social workers have previously qualified and worked in another profession). Similarly the title of Table 2 ('multidisciplinary health care professionals') requires amendment. It might be worth using here the phrase 'health and social care professionals' in line with usage elsewhere to include social workers as well as the range of health care professionals.

Although the abbreviation 'ACP' is explained in the Abstract, it would improve readability if the first use of the term within the main manuscript were also in full with the abbreviation following it - see 'ACP' (P 4: L 28-29). It would be preferable if acronyms could be avoided in the abstract.

Note that the Mental Capacity Act does not apply across the whole of the UK, but only to England and Wales (P 12, L 18). Also, despite there being a misleading web entry which comes up with a Google search, the Act is 2005 not 2007. Enactment of legislation often takes a period
of time and some provisions of this statute were not enacted until 2007. Similar caution may need to be exercised in relation to studies in locations with which I am less familiar.

9. Relevance & interest to the journal readership

This paper is relevant and of interest to the readership of the journal.

10. Conclusion

This paper is based on thorough work to identify and synthesise a substantial number of studies on the topic. The topic itself is timely. The review has promise and is worth publishing. Although the underpinning review seems robust (subject to the concept groupings in the search process being satisfactory), the manuscript requires attention to some issues before publication.

References


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.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
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