Reviewer’s report

Title: Images of God and attitudes towards death in relation to spiritual wellbeing: an exploratory side study of the EORTC QLQ-SWB32 validation study in palliative cancer patients

Version: 0 Date: 14 Sep 2017

Reviewer: Arndt Buessing

Reviewer’s report:

The topic is good and important, and others have published similar data with different samples and different instruments, too. Focusing on patients in palliative care units is thus an important issue. However, a validation study with only 54 persons (why only cancer?) from only one hospital is highly unsatisfactory. For me this is a strong limitation, because the (putatively non-representative) findings might be a matter of chance.

Methods: Please add the quality criteria of instruments used in this study. What was the response rate?

Is it correct that patients did not fill the instruments by themselves; couldn´t this be a bias?

When the "majority had no religious affiliation" and were identified as agnostics/atheists, is it wise to analyze "Images of God" at all? Does it mean that the patients don´t care too much about faith issues, and thus the findings are arbitrary or biased? Does the scoring on the "Unknowable God" sub-scale mean they don´t care at all, and are thus all agnostic/atheist persons scoring high on this scale?

How many persons had a persons had a "Personal God" image? Please don´t refer to mean scores only.

What was the rationale to perform the regression analyses? You didn´t state any hypotheses to be tested.

When you state that "this study is the first to show that an Unknowable Image of God might have a negative impact on spiritual wellbeing", you should more precisely define what this scale means in your specific context? It might be that most of the atheist/agnostics may mean that they can´t say anything about it, because they don´t really care about it. Indifference may thus be related with low spiritual wellbeing - which in turn means that they score low in the spiritual wellbeing scales because they don´t care at all. Agnostic views may mean "I cannot know anything about it", while atheistic views may mean "I don´t care about it". - You should substantiate your findings and differentiate the "believers" and "non-believers" with respect to their spirituality scores. These data are completely missing.
When you "expect that a Personal Image of God (…) would have a positive influence on SWB" you have to discuss the details! In fact, it is only marginally to weakly related to Existential wellbeing, Relationship with Self and Relationships with Others - and this is plausible. In contrast, it is strongly related to Relationship with Something Greater (and moderately also with Relationship with God) - and this is plausible, too. Thus, it is not a general "spiritual wellbeing" effect, but a specific one.

You refer to data of palliative cancer patients. Would you expect that the data are different in a general population from the Netherlands? - Data from non-palliative patients or healthy persons (as a "control") would be important.

It is sad that you did not cite too much of other researchers´ findings of using similar scales. You are not the first to measure spiritual wellbeing and related factors. Contextualizing your findings would be an important issue.

Conclusion: When it is important to improve in patients' spiritual wellbeing, you should more clearly define what this spiritual wellbeing really mean for non-religious persons. Moreover, how should it be improved, by whom? Who is really willing to be "improved" for what reason? Are the patients really lacking something - or are they satisfied with their mind-set? Are only the researchers convinced that they have to "improve" their patients?

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.

No

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

Yes

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.

I am able to assess the statistics

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:
Declaration of competing interests
Please complete a declaration of competing interests, considering the following questions:

1. Have you in the past five years received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

2. Do you hold any stocks or shares in an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

3. Do you hold or are you currently applying for any patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

4. Have you received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organization that holds or has applied for patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

5. Do you have any other financial competing interests?

6. Do you have any non-financial competing interests in relation to this paper?

If you can answer no to all of the above, write 'I declare that I have no competing interests' below. If your reply is yes to any, please give details below.

I declare that I have no competing interests

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal. I understand that my name will be included on my report to the authors and, if the manuscript is accepted for publication, my named report including any attachments I upload will be posted on the website along with the authors' responses. I agree for my report to be made available under an Open Access Creative Commons CC-BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). I understand that any comments which I do not wish to be included in my named report can be included as confidential comments to the editors, which will not be published.

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal