Reviewer’s report

Title: What does ‘complex’ mean in palliative care? Triangulating qualitative findings from 3 settings

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Reviewer: Nathan Goldstein

Reviewer’s report:

Carduff and colleagues have submitted a manuscript that reports a series of qualitative interviews from three different groups to determine how the decide which are the complex patients who have unmet palliative care needs. The idea behind the manuscript is quite novel and hasn't been explored much. The inclusion of three different specialties is particularly to be commended. However the biggest issue is that the authors seem to go back and forth between which are the complex patients who need palliative care and why it is difficult to deliver palliative care to these patients. This is a serious issue with the manuscript. In addition, the generalizability is limited by the inherent selection bias in the way subjects were enrolled as well as the single site nature of the study.

Major Comments

* Title - it is unclear how the study triangulates the need

* Methods - this is only at one hospital

* Methods - line 149 implies that they told people about the study and then whomever was interested could contact them - this creates a selection bias towards people who are interested in palliative care, etc. If this reviewer is interpreting this correctly, this is a relatively large issue in terms of selection bias

* Methods - it sounds like three different interviewers did the interviews. This should be made clearer and more explicit. Also - was there an interview guide? Did the three interviewers ask similar questions and use similar prompts?

* Results - the figure with the overlapping three circles doesn't stand on its own - that is, this reviewer can't quite figure out what it adds to the manuscript. A simple table summarizing the key themes in each of the group would be more straightforward

* Results - lines 248-260 - the first theme here talks about why specialist pall care is needed and the second about how they aren't equipped on AMU to handle these kinds of issues - the authors don't make it clear how this relates to complexity
* Results - section on "introducing pall care" - starts at 262 - this is interesting, but it isn't clear how it relates to how one defines complexity in terms of pall care

* Results - line 308 - effective communication across disciplines - this relates to how to effectively deliver palliative care, not how to define complex or identify which patients are appropriate. (The next concept about patients who for various reasons - e.g., dementia - make communication difficult is however on topic.)

* Discussion - line 370-371 - none of the quotes supplied support the idea that trajectory relates to complexity, only that non-malignant disease is more difficult

* Discussion - line 379 - Training needs to include various pall care skills - again the authors seem to be mixing up what is the right complex patient to receive pall care with how to deliver better palliative care

* Discussion - paragraph starting line 400 - monitoring patients over time - this does not seem to align to any of the themes

* Strengths and limitation - line 410 - this section actually does not list any limitations. There were several including: multiple interviewers, one site, potential selection bias among subjects

* Figure 2 is a relatively generic map of the various factors that relate to delivery of healthcare to patients with serious illness and could be eliminated. It is unclear what novelty it adds.

Minor Comments

* Abstract - should say in what country the study was done

* Methods - Design - what is JM and CW? (line 135-136)

* Methods - Design - line 137 - would be helpful to know characteristics of the hospital

* Methods - line 157 - what city?

* Discussion - line 357 - what is meant by common courtesies?

* Discussion - line 392 - what is SPICT?

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?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

No

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.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

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