Reviewer’s report

Title: “I go into crisis when …”: Ethics of care and moral dilemmas in Palliative care

Version: 0 Date: 13 Feb 2019

Reviewer: Rabih Chattat

Reviewer's report:

Thanks for authors for addressing this important issue in palliative care.

The Abstract is well structured and informative even if it can be improved.

The aims of the study lack in specificity to be clear for the reader. Investigating cannot be seen as an aim by itself.

Rather than a study design it is more a methods (qualitative methods), furthermore few words on data collection and analysis.

In the paragraph on setting/participants (p.3 line 44) I suggest to add some few information about number of participants by profession, to mention that they randomise the selection. Details needed to offer the opportunity for readers to gather more info about the study.

As conclusion the authors affirm that "ethics of care seems to emerge as a theoretical framework ....". Which is not mentioned in the main. I suggest to draw conclusions related to the aim.

The introduction is well written and consider the main approaches to ethics in palliative care. Authors propose an alternative to the previous theoretical approaches regarding ethics and care.

However it is not clear enough for me how study objectives/aims are related to the background. The aim as reported by authors is: "investigating how professionals make sense and handle ethical issues" while in the background (p.4 line 59-61) it seems that the aim is "to describe the relevance of ethics of care...). I would suggest authors to be more clear with the aim and to outline how the background is connected to aim. In specific authors should explain the link between the relevance of ethics of care and the need "to explore how HPs make sense and face ....."

Methods
Design: the theoretically-driven thematic analysis is a method to analyse qualitative data rather than a study design and can be reported under data analysis.

Study population: the authors report clearly a selection criteria for participants as well as they use a randomization procedure. The type of hospital wards may need some more details. What did they mean
by "wards involved in the care …." Geriatrics ward or other disease specific wards or ....

Data Collection: the information about data collection are detailed. The concern is that the data analysis proceed by fitting results into a set of themes used for the development of the interview. There is a high bias risk since using a set of themes already available don't allow authors to check if new themes emerge. The process of coding interviews and then moving to the development of categories and themes is missing (see for example Marks and Yardley, 2004 on research methods for clinical and health psychology). Usually a kind of code book is developed in order starting from the first interview in order to support researcher in coding the interviews.

In the result section the authors report that 16 out of 20 agreed to participate. I suggest to move it into the methods section as well as the sentence about the duration of the interview. How authors set the number of participants? It is a convenience number, they refer to some literature data; usually in qualitative research the concept of saturation is used to define number of interviews. Can authors give some details about.

Results: the results are well reported and sentences represent well the underlying theme described. I have to outline again the importance of describing, in the methods section the details of data analysis. All results fit into a pre-constructed scheme of themes, so results seem as a way for the operationalization of a concept or a kind of how theories are represented in practice. A confirmative analysis? I suggest to consider the whole process from setting aims, to describing methods to presenting results.

Discussion: In my opinion discussion should start by considering the aim of the study. And what authors report is different from the aims described. I would suggest authors to clearly set the aim of the study and to link discussion to the aim.

The discussion is about morality and its role in care considering the ethics of care approach.

I would suggest authors to connect the discussion paragraph to the study results.

Conclusions: The authors conclusion "highlights the importance of providing …." (P.13, line 16). It is not clear to me how this recommendation can be drawn from the results of the study. At least the results inform on what are the main aspects of ethics of care reported or described by health professionals which can be used to develop a course content.

While the last sentence of the paragraph is related to the aims of the study which seem to be a kind of confirmative study of the ethics of care approach.

Strength and limitation: The authors report a list of limitation of the study but no strength are reported.

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.

Unable to assess

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.

I recommend additional statistical review

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