Reviewer’s report

Title: Music in palliative care: a qualitative study with patients suffering from cancer

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Reviewer: Isaac Chua

Reviewer's report:

Summary: Qualitative study to evaluate the effects of a musical intervention on patients within an inpatient palliative care unit. An actor and musician provided the musical intervention. 10 patients were interviewed by a clinical psychologist. Dual coding was performed by one of the palliative care physicians. Major positive themes that emerged regarding included increased patient satisfaction and well-being, patients appreciation of the attention provided by the artists, enhanced social ties among patients, family, and staff, and creation of new memories and emergence of old ones triggered by the music. Negative themes associated with the intervention included patient reflections on their loss of autonomy / current physical state, increased fatigue, the need for patients to become acclimated to the idea of a musical intervention (i.e. an adaptation period), reflections on one's mortality, and difficulty choosing songs.

Major Comments

Strengths:

1) A qualitative study is a wise approach to better understand the patient experience of music in the context of serious illness. It allowed an opportunity for an in-depth exploration and generation of themes in an area where there is a relatively small body of evidence. Great decision for a study design.

2) The questions in the semi-structured interview did not appear to be biased and were very open-ended.

3) Study population was clearly displayed and apparent to the reader.

4) You clearly delineated when you reached saturation.

5) The Positive Aspects section of your paper was robust and well supported by the quotes provided.
Limitations:

1) Please describe the musical intervention in greater detail. You do explain that the intervention included singing and playing a musical instrument. However, it would be helpful to know how your intervention differs or parallels prior music therapy interventions for cancer patients. Providing this context allows the reader to better understand the themes that emerge from your study and how the knowledge generated from your study is relevant compared to the preexisting knowledge in the literature. Of note, it would also be helpful to explain exactly what role the actor played in this musical intervention. If there was some other theatrical component in addition to just singing and playing an instrument, it should be noted.

2) Please clarify what qualitative approach you are utilizing for this study. Although you do mention that you are taking an inductive approach, please be more specific. It appears that you are taking a phenomenological approach since you are focusing on better understanding the patient experience of the musical intervention. This is important because if you were taking a grounded-theory approach, you would likely need more interviews before reaching saturation.

3) Please explain more clearly how the themes in the results section are related to memory. In your abstract, you mention that you "aimed to examine how patients hospitalized in the palliative care unit experienced a musical intervention with a focus on themes related to memory." However, when reading the results, some of the themes and quotes support this stated focus, whereas others do not. For example, the theme of "a vector for social ties and sharing" and the quotes within that theme do not have a clear link to memory. I would recommend either finding different quotes to support the assertion that your themes are related to memory or find another common thread that unifies your themes more cohesively.

4) Under the Limits and Difficulties section, please either consolidate the themes or flesh out each individual theme more thoroughly. Compared to the Positive Aspects section, each theme was not well supported since most themes only had one or two quotes.

Minor comments:

- For Table 2, it may be worth including some more specific information regarding the reason for hospitalization (e.g. pain crisis, hospice / end-of-life care). The clinical context significantly affects the patient's experience of music and will naturally affect the type and quality of quotes that you obtain from 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.

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.

Not relevant to this manuscript

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Needs some language corrections before being published

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