Reviewer's report

Title: Volunteers in a biography project with palliative care patients – a feasibility study

Version: 0 Date: 02 Feb 2019

Reviewer: Catherine Walshe

Reviewer's report:

German volunteers in a biography project with palliative care patients - a feasibility study.

Title: I might recommend taking the country name out of the title, there is evidence that this can restrict readers. Otherwise this uses key terms.

Abstract: This doesn't indicate what areas of feasibility this study sought to address. There isn't a sense of what design/method was used to address this question in the abstract. Qualitative content analysis is only mentioned as an analytical tool, rather than there being an overarching design. I am concerned that the abstract mentions 'benefit', given this is a feasibility study with only a few patients (the number of patients is not stated in the abstract, but implied as 9), I think this overstates these findings. Without feasibility objectives, it is hard to determine whether this study was feasible or not. I would suggest also being clear about the difference between a feasibility and a pilot study, as this is also called pilot in this abstract.

Introduction. The background focuses on biographical therapeutic approaches, which is relevant to understanding this study, and draws from appropriate literature. It would, however, be helpful to indicate which of these interventions is the basis for the intervention tested in this study. The rationale for volunteers delivering these interventions is, however, weaker, and this section could be enhanced with stronger argumentation. The rationale appears to be one of replacement of paid staff, which is often considered to be problematic in volunteering literature. I would suggest also drawing more clearly from the literature on volunteers and their roles and impact on people towards the end of their lives, the impact on them, and the feasibility of such interventions e.g. (Allen et al., 2014, Candy et al., 2015, Dodd et al., 2018, Hallett et al., 2012, Morris et al., 2013, Mountain et al., 2015, Pesut et al., 2014, Walshe et al., 2016), but this is not an exhaustive list.

The rationale for this being a feasibility study needs to be much more clearly articulated please. What were the elements of the study where feasibility needed to be determined? It is unclear if this is associated with training, delivering the intervention, or elements of the study such as sampling, data collection etc. This section (or more likely the start of the methods section) would be enhanced by stating a clear research question and feasibility objectives.

You also mention employing volunteers (p.3, line 72), but I don't think you mean employment as this implies payment? It is also unclear why you suggest the intervention, in the hands of volunteers, is a psychosocial intervention rather than a psychotherapeutic intervention, and this needs a clear rationale and supporting evidence please.
Methods. Unfortunately I found this section challenging to follow. Could I suggest that this is re-ordered following reporting guideline such as COREQ or SRQR, and using the TiDiER guidelines to report the details of the intervention. Subheadings guiding the reader to sections on setting, population, sampling, intervention, data collection, data analysis etc. would be very helpful. What is the overarching design/method of the study?

Sampling: How were volunteers sampled from the pool of available volunteers? Were any new volunteers recruited to deliver this service? Did they have to have volunteered in the specific hospice setting previously, or could their 'training in hospice care' have been received elsewhere? On what basis was the 'selection' made? May there have been some form of bias? What were the inclusion and exclusion criteria? This is an important feasibility question, as if they were selected informally against particularly rare characteristics (for example their educational background, or a 'sense' that they could provide this intervention), then this may mean that it is not possible to scale up this intervention. What was the sample size required to determine feasibility?

How were patients identified and sampled, and against what inclusion and exclusion criteria?

Intervention: As above, I would suggest presenting this explicitly using the TiDIER guidelines. I assume this includes both the training, and the delivery of the biographical work? Is the written booklet part of the intervention? How was the training determined? Is this a 'standard' training for this biographical intervention? Indeed, is this a specific biographical intervention, as per the earlier introduction section? What is the existing evidence that underpins the effectiveness of this intervention per-se, delivered by paid staff rather than volunteers? Was the intervention modified in any way to be delivered by volunteers?

Data collection.

What was the purpose of the questionnaire to volunteers at the start? Was this a validated questionnaire? Can the questionnaire be appended please.

Why was quality of life assessed? Was this presumed to be the outcome of any larger study, and why was FACIT-Pal 14 chosen as an outcome measure? Is this a common outcome tool used in such biographical interventions? Are the elements within it felt to be those that may be impacted by the biographical intervention? When you say assessed pre and post intervention, with what timing, especially how long after the intervention was this measured? The FACIT-pal14 instrument used asks for an appraisal over the last 7 days, so there has to be a gap between administrations otherwise there is no purpose to the assessment, the number of days/weeks between assessments needs to be given.

At what stage after completing the biographical intervention were volunteers interviewed - it is unclear if this was at the end of overall project, or just after the end of their own involvement. What is meant by 'guided interview'? Can a complete topic guide be given please. What form of content analysis was used?
What were the dates of data collection? Whilst research ethics committee approval is noted, I can't see any details of other ethical procedures such as distress management procedures etc.

Results. Can I suggest presenting the demographic and other descriptive data about both volunteer and patient participants in a single table, so it is easier to see these details on gender, age, marital status, length of interview, transcription etc. Without details of the feasibility objectives of the study, it is hard to interpret whether the data collected indicates feasibility or not. Clearly, they were able to deliver the intervention with a limited range of participants, but I cannot assess if this indicates feasibility or not. This was, however, not without burden, with adverse data on the burden of this intervention on volunteers (e.g. time for transcribing etc.).

FACIT-pal scores are given, but more information is required here on not only mean scores, but also range etc. given the small sample. Whilst there is a mean increase reported, this is not interpreted with reference to norms for FACIT-pal, nor data that indicates MCID or similar e.g. (Kavalieratos et al., 2016). How do these data compare to outcome data from the chosen biographical intervention? Whilst it is stated that an effect size could be calculated from these data, it is not clear why this is not done.

Unfortunately I cannot see how the volunteer questionnaire adds to knowledge, but again these data would be better presented in a table or other similar format.

Discussion. As a feasibility study, it would be usual for the discussion to focus on the feasibility objectives, with recommendations for a full study. This is not how this discussion is presented. Occasionally it strays into re-presentation of findings, which should be avoided. I think the discussion needs to be reconsidered, with a different approach taken in terms of the literature to which these findings are presented.

Please check throughout for grammar and syntax, as there are some errors in English expression.

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.

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

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