Reviewer's report

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

Version: 0 Date: 11 Feb 2019

Reviewer: Joe Low

Reviewer's report:

This paper describes a small feasibility study looking at training volunteers to deliver a biographical intervention in a specialist palliative care unit. As there are few papers which specifically look at volunteers delivering an intervention, this paper is both novel and unique, and is worth considering publishing.

However, before it is considered suitable for publishing, it needs to be both restructured (to make it easier for the reader to follow the logic of the paper) and rewritten to provide more details, before I can recommend it to be accepted for publication.

I will address these section by section.

1. Keywords: I would remove the qualitative as you use a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data

2. Introduction:

Main comment: More details are needed about what biographical interventions are, in particularly what changes are they trying to achieve in a person to improve quality of life? Your sentence in the discussion, (p8, 1191-200) would be more appropriate in the introduction section.

Other comments:

a) On p3, l60-61, were these biographical interventions delivered by trained personnel? Please clarify.

b) Under the aims of the study, I would list out the aims of the study as follows: 'This study has the following aims: i) the feasibility of training and employing volunteers as a psychosocial intervention, ii) explore potential issues around organisation, resources and challenges; iii) evaluate potential effectiveness in improving patient outcome.'

c) Minor point: P3, l64 - insert 'and the' in between words 'New Zealand' and 'United Kingdom'.
3. Methodology

Main comment: This section would benefit from being restructured and sub-divided, which would make this section clearer and more transparent for readers. I would recommend the subsections used for structuring randomised control trials (though I recognise that this is not an RCT): Design, setting (of study), Participants, Inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria, recruitment, intervention (description), procedure/data collection, data analysis.

Within these subsections, the authors can clarify the following points:

a) How did the main author decide which volunteers were assigned to which patients?

b) Recruitment:

i. Which hospice volunteers are being recruited? Was every volunteer eligible to be trained?

ii. Patients recruited - was there an eligibility criteria? In-patient or out-patient?

c) Intervention:

i. Was it one session or more?

ii. Who delivered the training session? Who provided the supervision to the volunteers and how often? How qualified were the trainers to deliver the biographical intervention?

iii. Was there a criteria matching volunteers to patients?

iv. Timeframe of study: what month and year did recruitment for the study begin and end?

d) To attach the questionnaire given to volunteers (p4, l90) in an Appendix. Was this a structured standardised questionnaire or a self-constructed questionnaire with open questions?

e) Not clear from the current methodology section what data was collected to answer the specific aims of the feasibility study? This needs to be made more clearer and put in the 'Procedure' subsection, especially if answering the questions on organisation, resources and challenges. I am unclear how this data was collected? Were volunteers later interviewed about these questions?

4. Results

Main comments:

a) I suggest that the authors should subdivide their findings to answer the questions highlighted in the aims of their study. I found it difficult the main themes coming out from the analysis and how this related to the aims of the study.
b) The qualitative analysis is currently very descriptive. However, one of the key strengths of qualitative research is to allow a deeper understanding of the experiences/phenomena being explored. In some cases, it would be interesting to explore some of the initial points raised to give a deeper understanding of the concept described. For example, on p6, l.138, the authors comment that 'the interview was described as a no-brainer' - what are the authors trying to convey in this context? It may be that the authors are limited with doing this analysis with the data they have and that is fine but this needs to be acknowledged in the discussion.

c) I recommend that the authors review the number of quotes they use. I accept that quotes represent important evidence to support the themes identified in the study. However, many of the quotes used in this paper are very descriptive and short, and the point from them could be written as part of the text outlining the different aspects identified the theme identified.

d) Minor points:

i) What is meant by 'non-homogenous' in this context (p6, 142).?

ii) Replace 'will' with 'would'. P6, l131.

5. Discussion:

a) Whilst the key findings highlighted are clear, the result section needs to be restructured to make it clear where these findings initiatly come from (see suggestions in results section).

The authors may want to discuss whether an increase of 5 points on the FACIT-Pal score is clinically significant. Also replace the word 'demonstrated' (p8, l183) with 'suggest'.

b) The paragraph starting with Chochinov et al (p8, l191 - p9, l200) - may be more appropriate in Introduction section (see Introduction - main comment).

c) Likewise, review whether the following paragraph starting with 'Volunteering - p9, 201 to l213, should be in the introduction.

d) I would like the authors to discuss their ideas about how they would use their findings from this study to improve the delivery of this interventions and how one would evaluate this intervention in the future.
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?
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No

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