Reviewer's report

Title: Barriers to cervical screening among older women from hard-to-reach groups: a qualitative study in England

Version: 0 Date: 12 Dec 2018

Reviewer: Juan Félix

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Review of Manuscript: "Attitudes to cervical cancer screening among older women from hard to reach groups: A qualitative study in England." BMWH-D-18-00332

The authors of this manuscript describe the results of discussions among focus groups of women from hard to reach groups in England. These included women members of ethnic minorities and lower socio economic status. The manuscript reports discussed items from 38 women in 6 different focus groups (each numbering between 4 and 9 women). The authors report "low knowledge of cervical cancer risk factors, low knowledge of the screening process, Pain/discomfort, and trust in the medical system" as possible barriers to continued screening. The authors conclude that targeted education for these groups to "debunk" these beliefs would "help".

This manuscript fails the reader in many ways.

The authors state that they used advertisements and recruited the aid of community groups as well as of a market research group. Women were offered 25 pounds sterling to participate. In spite of all of these efforts the study recruited only 38 women, 4 of who were over the age targeted by the study. The authors did not offer data regarding how women were contacted, how many women were contacted or what percent agreed to participate. This data is essential in order to determine how representative this group was of the targeted population. The lower the rate of agreement to participate, the more likely that the population is biased. Data regarding percentage of women from the different focus groups would be essential for the reader to know.
The Results section was entirely descriptive and in such general terms that there is no ability to find distinction between focus groups. Although this reviewer would have predicted from the low numerator in each group that significance would be difficult to attain, the authors did not even attempt to quantify differences in responses between focus groups. One item of interest discussed in the Discussion section did mention that one focus group didn't even discuss sexual behavior, a fact that would lead one to believe that this issue is of importance to the knowledge and attitudes regarding cervical cancer risks. However the authors failed to mention in which focus group this occurred, leaving this rare point of useful knowledge of little practical value to the reader.

As a matter of research protocol, the authors discuss in page 13 lines 5-12 that while some women responded initially not having knowledge of cervical cancer screening, once shown photographs (presumably of the procedure) that they acknowledged having knowledge of it. The authors did not describe this in the Methods section (an essential component if this work is to be reproduced), nor did they provide the reader with data regarding how many women changed their response after being shown photographs or in which focus groups they were found. This would again represent useful data for the reader.

Acknowledging that the topic of cervical cancer is difficult to approach, the questions designed by the authors and discussed did not seem designed to yield quantifiable data. The reader cannot assess if the majority of women felt this way, if only a vocal minority opined on the issues. The manuscript is entirely descriptive with no way for the reader to assess the likely accuracy or relevance of the authors opinions. An example of this is found in page 12, Discussion Section, beginning in line 59. The authors state that a "number of erroneous beliefs" held by the women (unknown number/percentage) were uncovered where "improving knowledge and debunking beliefs" would "help“. The erroneous beliefs are not specified. This is critical since although some beliefs and misconceptions can be changed with education, it is well documented in the cervical cancer screening literature that certain beliefs and behaviors are difficult if not impossible to change in these populations.

Finally, in the Introduction Section the authors state that "drawing from 22 studies" and then listed a series of barriers to screening that are identical to the conclusions of the current study. The authors need to effective advocate why their study of 38 women contributes to the body of literature on the topic.
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.

No

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
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No

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Not relevant to this manuscript

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