Reviewer's report

Title: A qualitative study of changes in expectations over time among patients with chronic low back pain seeking four CAM therapies

Version: 2 Date: 22 September 2014

Reviewer: Eeva Sointu

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Review

A qualitative study of changes in expectations over time among patients with chronic low back pain seeking four CAM therapies

This is a thoughtful and interesting article. I enjoyed reading the paper but would like to make the following suggestions.

Major compulsory revisions:

1. In terms of methods, it would be helpful if the authors discussed their use of phenomenological analysis a little further (p.9).

Minor essential revisions

2. The authors do not reflect on other potential positive effects of CAM including the ways in which CAM practitioners can facilitate experiences of being listened to and being cared for. Why people remain committed to CAM practices could also be discussed in terms of the other benefits – such as care and recognition – that practitioners may provide (see Baarts and Pedersen 2009; Sointu 2012).

Discretionary revisions

3. The interview quotes outlined, for example Nora on pp. 11-12, include much material on control. More could be said about the manner in which CAM enables empowerment and control and, moreover, how feelings of control contribute to wellbeing as well as to a desire to utilize a CAM practice.

4. The interviewee narratives also encompass other interesting shifts. First, the citations speak of a shift in authority to define ill health. The move from ‘searching for cure to seeking maintenance strategies.’ (p.12) is interesting because this shift embodies a changing idea of responsibility that comes to lie in the hands of the patient/client. While authors note this towards the end of the paper, more could be said about responsibility. Responsibility, furthermore, can entwine with and encourage feelings of control. It might also be possible to see the disappointment some participants feel in having to engage in continual health maintenance as disappointment in regards to the idea that there is a (biomedical) cure available. The challenge of chronic back pain thus pertains also to a need to adjust understandings of what medicine can do.
5. Analyzing the notion of healing further could also be useful. The ongoing health maintenance that participants came to value could be understood in terms of changing understandings of health. Participants appear to move from a focus on biomedical health to a much broader sense of health as wellbeing.

6. Including more of the sociological literature into CAM use would be useful. For example:


Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests