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
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Reviewer: Felicity Bishop

Reviewer's report:

This paper reports on a fascinating longitudinal qualitative study examining changes in expectations over time among low back pain patients using CAM therapies. Very few longitudinal qualitative studies have been published in this field and this study demonstrates clearly the value of such an approach. I enjoyed reading the manuscript and feel it will make a very nice contribution to the literature.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. In the Methods section please add a brief summary of the focus and findings from previous analyses of this data, to clarify for the reader the novelty in this presentation.

2. There are many different phenomenological approaches to qualitative research. In the Methods section please describe and justify the approach that you took.

3. The description of the Matrix Analysis is nice and clear but suggested to me that this approach might risk (a) losing sight of the broader context of participants' experiences and (b) over-simplifying, for example if participants talked about expectations in different ways within the same interview it is not clear how the Matrix approach would be able to capture this (or would multiple quotes be allowed in the matrix cells? – please clarify). I would like to see some reflexive commentary on the limitations of this approach and/or how they were overcome. This would probably be best placed in the Discussion section.

4. In the Discussion section it is stated that “our findings…suggest that interactions with CAM practitioners may contribute to positive behaviour change” (line 393-4) This does not come through strongly enough in the Results section which hardly mentions interactions with practitioners. Amend the Discussion or Results so that they are consistent.

5. In the Discussion section there is no explicit commentary on the specificity or transferability of the findings. Do the authors think their findings might transfer to other chronic conditions and/or other CAM settings? Do you think the findings are specific to CAM or is there any evidence that similar processes might happen in conventional medical settings?

Minor Essential Revisions

1. Three changes to the abstract are needed:
a. Clarify that some of the participants were interviewed repeatedly over time.
b. State the methodology used for qualitative analysis not the computer software used to support it.
c. Rewrite the conclusions section (at present it merely restates the results).

2. In the Methods section please clarify whether the same interviewer conducted the repeated interviews over time with each of the longitudinal participants.

3. In the results section when referring to individual participants in the text please use their pseudonyms (rather than their numbers e.g. [124] line 233, which are easily confused with citations).

4. Write out numbers in words when they are used at the start of a sentence (e.g. line 207).

Discretionary Revisions

5. The background introduces the topic and contextualises it in the literature. I would suggest the authors might like to also consider Charlotte Paterson’s qualitative research on acupuncture consultations as her studies are also particularly pertinent here, e.g. to the discussion in Background paragraph 3 (lines 87-99) on the role of the practitioner in triggering behaviour change.

6. The paragraph in lines 113 to 117 interrupts the flow of the background section – consider re-positioning it.

7. The use of Spanish for some interviews is described in 154-155 and again in 200-203, consider merging these descriptions to avoid repetition.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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