Reviewer's report

Title: Empowerment of patients in online discussions about medicine use

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Reviewer: Neil Coulson

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript.

To my knowledge there has been little attention given to exploring the empowerment of patients in online discussions concerning the use of medicine. As a consequence, I was very much looking forward to reading this manuscript and learning more about the study undertaken.

On the whole I feel positive towards this manuscript but would wish to see some revisions before recommending it for publication. These revisions, however, are not insurmountable and I am confident the authors will be able to respond to them appropriately.

Major revisions

1. My main problem with this manuscript is that it draws upon rather outdated work by van uden-kraan et al and whilst this work was very important at the time there has since been much work which has extended it. This applies to at least TWO main areas:

a) line 107 - it is argued that previous concerns have been unfounded. However - this work was a message analysis study (like the current one) and it is likely that few problems were identified because patients are now known to actively correct inaccurate information and that moderators are likely to remove any incorrect information. Therefore, we cannot rely on message analysis studies to determine the extent to which there are problems with online forums. Since van Uden-Kraan et al published this study there have been other message analysis studies but also several questionnaire studies which have directly asked members about any problems. It would be useful and indeed needed to offer a more up to date review of this specific aspect of the literature.

b) line 173 - exactly the same problem in that this work is based on older work by van Uden-Kraan et al on empowerment. Since that study was published there have been many more studies which have shown that there are indeed many more empowering processes, several disempowering processes and together have related them to a range of important psycho-social outcomes. The introduction and indeed the methods section does need to take into account somehow the fact that this aspects of the literature has developed far beyond that which van Uden-Kraan et al originally proposed. Quite what this means for the analysis is up to the authors to consider - but at the very least there ought to
be a fuller and more up to date review of the literature with other articles addressing this topic cited, if not discussed.

2. The analysis concludes that 'we did not see any major disadvantages occur' - however - based on the above comments - are the authors happy that they in fact looked for the potential disadvantages? I would like to see some comment on this so the reader is clear as to the scope of the analysis undertaken.

3. The comment about negative posts line 332 - this is perhaps explained by the comments above that Ref 11 used groups where moderators removed incorrect or unhelpful replies. In any case, I think the reasons suggested are speculative at best and need to be revised and more evidence based suggestions put forward.

Minor revisions

4. The authors might wish to include, for information, a statistic concerning the % of patients prescribed medications for long term self-management of a condition. This is implied but would strengthen the rationale for the study.

5. How were the threads randomly selected - please specify which tool was used to do this.

6. In the abstract - the term 'self-efficiency' was used but this felt a little odd. Could the authors reflect on whether this is in fact the correct term and they are happy with what it suggests.

7. I would suggest adding 'online forum' to the keywords if this is possible.

Despite this issues I very much liked this manuscript and if these issues addressed I believe it makes an important contribution to the field.

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