Reviewer’s report

Title: Understanding the modifiable health systems barriers to hypertension management in Malaysia: a multi-method health systems appraisal approach

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Reviewer: Christopher McKevitt

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This well written paper presents findings from a comprehensive whole systems appraisal to collect data to inform the development of an intervention to improve hypertension management in Malaysia. This is a thorough and labour intensive approach to health systems planning and development and the case for such an approach is well made. The paper necessarily presents a somewhat condensed overview of the current picture of hypertension management in Malaysia that takes into account multiple levels, including economic, epidemiological, health service organisation, clinical governance, social and cultural. The paper hints at but does not spell out how these factors might underpin or inform the design of a novel approach to pharmacological management of hypertension. It will be interesting to learn how the intervention that is developed will address the extremely complex picture, and the extent to which it focuses solely on getting people to take tablets as prescribed.

The authors highlight the existence of traditional health beliefs that dissuade people from adhering to treatment when asymptomatic (as in the case, usually, of hypertension). We recently published a review of qualitative research that argues that this idea is found across the world and thus the particularity suggested here might be over stated. Malaysians’ understanding of hypertension, and their subsequent self-management of the condition, sound similar to other accounts in the literature. We have therefore argued that improving adherence might be achieved through improved understanding of and engagement with patients’ ideas about causality, experiences of symptoms, and concerns about drug side effects, regardless of setting. (see Marshall, Wolfe, McKevitt, BMJ 2012;345:e3953.) This would required sustained and multiple efforts to convince patients that the biomedical explanatory model of hypertension is worth accepting.

We learn much from this paper about the situation in Malaysia, although the authors argue that this particular case has wider application. Thus I wondered if the authors’ intent was methodological rather than descriptive; and if that is the case it would have been helpful to read a more explicit account of the practice of undertaking this type of systems wide appraisal.

Figures 2 and 3 would benefit from a title.

A couple of typos: page 2, line 72; page 13, line 543
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: none