Reviewer’s report

Title: Foot Exercise plus Education versus wait and see for the Treatment of plantar heel pain (FEET Trial): A protocol for a feasibility study.

Version: 0 Date: 10 Feb 2020

Reviewer: Daniel Bonanno

Reviewer's report:

I congratulate the authors on planning this project. This manuscript is on a topic which I expect will be of great interest to readers of JFAR. The study is well designed, and the manuscript is very well written. The additional files are also very detailed and support the manuscript well. As the trial has been registered my suggestions largely relate to providing greater clarity regarding the study's methodology and areas that I believe warrant further discussion.

Major Essential Revisions

1) Discussion: The authors have presented strengths of the proposed trial but have not presented or discussed any limitations. Please present/discuss study limitations.

2) Twenty participants with PHP will be randomly allocated to one of two groups for a 12-week intervention period: (i) foot exercise plus education (includes 8 physiotherapy sessions and detailed education), or (ii) brief advice (includes 1 physiotherapy session and brief advice). Given the vastly different hours of treatment received between the two groups, I feel the authors must acknowledge and discuss the potential contextual effects that may affect the results of this study (i.e. could any observed differences in patient outcome measures be attributed to contextual effects and not the actual interventions being compared).

3) Further to the above comment, have the authors considered that there may be differences between the groups based on the level of education received between the two groups. If the control group also received 'detailed education' then any benefits could be attributed to foot exercises and differences in contextual effects, but at present any difference scan be attributed to foot exercises, education, and differences in contextual effects. Please discuss.

4) Reference is made to intrinsic foot muscles throughout the manuscript, yet several tests and exercises will also strengthen/test extrinsic muscles. Can the authors discuss this issue or consider reviewing terminology to ensure most accurate terminology is used? See line 485 as an example.

Minor Essential Revisions
1) Keywords: consider adding 'Plantar Fasciitis' (MeSH term)

2) Please ensure British English or American English (not both) is used throughout the manuscript. For example, on page 5 (line 100) you have used 'characterized' (American English) and on page 10 (lines 229 &amp; 254, respectively) you have used 'randomised' and 'programme' (British English). Other examples exist, so please amend throughout. I suggest that British English is preferred as the authors are from Australia, and the Journal of Foot and Ankle Research is the official journal of the Australian Podiatry Association and The College of Podiatry (UK).

3) Throughout the manuscript. There are several instances where examples are listed but they don't have an 'and' before the last listed item or don't have an 'etc.' at the end. For example (line 216), '(e.g. metal implants, pacemaker).' Please either change to 'or pacemaker' or 'pacemaker, etc.' Please amend this issue throughout the manuscript. Also, when listing only some examples I suggest using 'e.g.' at the start of the list to indicate it is not a complete list. See line 185.

4) Please check abbreviations. Plantar heel pain is abbreviated early in the manuscript and then it appears intermittently in full (not abbreviated) later in the manuscript. The same applies to 'RCT'.

5) Line 201: Will 'first step pain during the previous week' indicate the average first step pain for the previous week, the worst first step pain for the previous week, the best first step pain for the previous week, etc. Please clarify what data will be used.

6) Exclusion criteria. I think it would be beneficial to indicate that participants will be excluded if they 'report' a history of X, Y, Z, etc. as it appears that you wont be testing for the presence/absence of these conditions and you will rely on participants reporting them.

7) Allocation: "Following baseline assessment, participants will be randomised via concealed allocation....." Can you clarify what will be known about the participants following baseline assessment (is it just whether they are eligible or not)? Could any information that has been obtained at baseline compromise allocation concealment?

8) Check the consistent use of hyphens throughout. E.g. '12-week' vs '12 week' vs '30 minutes'.

9) Line 236: Can you please comment on the length of the training session and if knowledge transfer to the physiotherapists was measured (i.e. how do you know that they left this session knowing what to do?)

10) I assume data collection hasn't started. However, if it has, please state this.

11) What will you use as a definition of an 'adverse event'? Please include.
12) Line 261: what will the clinician use as a guide to determine whether IFMs are recruited without excessive extrinsic foot muscle contribution. What is considered 'excessive' and how will this be determined?

13) Lines 273-274: Please outline the rationale used to underpin the advice provided regarding footwear, posture and gait.

14) Check spacing consistency. E.g. '0-5 / 10' (line 264) vs '&lt;5/10' (line 265).

15) One-on-one semi-structured interviews: have these questions been established? If so, what are they?

16) Line 376: An Oxford comma has been used here. This is not the case elsewhere in the manuscript. Please check for consistency throughout.

17) Line 448: when will the video recordings be taken, and what planes will the recordings be taken in?

18) Line 461: fix spacing issue.

19) Line 470: Please either use a '-' or 'to' between the numbers consistently. I prefer 'to' as '-' can sometimes make a positive number look 'negative'.

20) Line 480 and 482. Here the distances have been reported in cms and then mm. I suggest that a consistent unit of measure is used.

21) Line 490: What is a 'make test'?

22) Line 514-518: A sample size of 20 has been used. Please justify/use reference that this is an adequate sample size to address the aims of the study. If recruitment is going well will you stop recruiting at 20 or keep going? At present it sounds like you will stop at 20 (which is fine), but if it isn't then please indicate this.

23) Line 543: A criticism of previous research is that exercise programs were not adequate (volume, progressions, etc.). What makes the strengthening programme used in this study adequate? Although it seems very adequate, was it based on existing strengthening guidelines?

24) Line 548: Add hyphen for consistency to 'single leg', as earlier in the sentence you use 'two-leg'.

Discretionary minor revisions

1) Methods, design: when I was reading this section, I was questioning whether stratification occurred, what were the random permuted block sizes, etc. I later read some
of this information was provided under 'allocation'. I wonder if it is worth adding to the 'design' section something like '(see 'allocation' for more detail regarding randomisation).

2) I note that the authors have elected to use the term 'randomised clinical trial' in preference to 'randomised controlled trial'. Is there a reason for this?

**Level of interest**
Please indicate how interesting you found the manuscript:

An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English**
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

**Declaration of competing interests**
Please complete a declaration of competing interests, considering the following questions:

1. Have you in the past five years received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

2. Do you hold any stocks or shares in an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the publication of this manuscript, either now or in the future?

3. Do you hold or are you currently applying for any patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

4. Have you received reimbursements, fees, funding, or salary from an organization that holds or has applied for patents relating to the content of the manuscript?

5. Do you have any other financial competing interests?

6. Do you have any non-financial competing interests in relation to this paper?

If you can answer no to all of the above, write 'I declare that I have no competing interests' below. If your reply is yes to any, please give details below.

I declare that I have no competing interests

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal. I understand that my name will be included on my report to the authors and, if the manuscript is accepted for publication, my named report including any attachments I upload will be posted on the website along with the authors' responses. I agree for my report to be made available under an Open Access Creative Commons
CC-BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). I understand that any comments which I do not wish to be included in my named report can be included as confidential comments to the editors, which will not be published.

I agree to the open peer review policy of the journal