Reviewer’s report

Title: Recruitment challenges in clinical research. A case study and lessons learned.

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Reviewer: Adwoa Hughes-Morley

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The authors report the outcome of recruitment for their clinical trial of a web support tool for people diagnosed with cancer and their carers.

In terms of strengths, this paper focuses on an under-researched area, and the subject matter is interesting. This paper has the potential to add to the literature. It is useful to have a clearly documented response rate of each recruitment strategy tested in the case study, and for the authors to summarise the pros and cons of each recruitment strategy.

However there are some weaknesses within this manuscript that in my opinion need addressing before it can be accepted for publication. Case studies of recruitment experiences in cancer clinical research are not new [1-5]. The authors could have gone further to generate additional, important insights which would benefit the wider literature and those conducting similar studies in future. The authors write that advertising in two newspapers cost approximately $1000, and that advertising on the internet was much more cost-effective. More detail would be useful:

• What were the relative costs of the various recruitment efforts?
• How much time resource was spent on each of the recruitment interventions?
• How much did the recruitment interventions cost per recruited participant?

The authors conclude that opt out recruitment strategies are the most effective, yet this contrasts with their own admission that “response rates for the approaches are not comparable due to differences in prioritized resources and time”. A clear economic assessment of the resource commitments of each of the strategies used would be useful, and certainly make the conclusions more meaningful.

It is important to show reasons why people declined to participate. However, it is perhaps more important to show whether or not decliners differed significantly from those enrolled into the study in demographic and disease related variables, to demonstrate the representativeness of the final study sample.

The McDonald and Colleagues reference is out of date and should be updated. The same study group have published an updated paper, which found that recruitment rates into clinical trials are improving, with 55% of trials meeting their original recruitment target[6]; however much remains to be done to improve
recruitment into clinical trials.

More detail about the clinical research would also be useful, such as what were the four groups that participants were randomised into? The intervention arms could have had an impact on the patients and carers decisions to participate.

On a minor note, I think the authors need to identify early in the manuscript that the study is a randomised controlled trial (as opposed to a clinical research observational study). There are issues which are different to recruiting into observational studies as opposed to RCTs.


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