Author’s response to reviews

Title: "Recruitment, recruitment, recruitment" - the need for more focus on retention: A qualitative study of five trials

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Author’s response to reviews:

We would like to thank the reviewers for taking the time to review our paper and for their constructive comments. We hope we have addressed these in the revised submission. Below are responses to each comment indicating changes made and where to find them. Within the manuscript changes are highlighted in yellow.

Reviewer reports:

Reviewer #3: This well-written paper explores an important area of enquiry. I have a few comments.

1. Discussion could briefly discuss how findings can be generalised to settings other than the UK or other well-resourced settings.

Response: As this was deemed to be an important point a new paragraph has been added to the discussion. The paragraph addresses literature on social relationships and incentives in low-middle income countries and how this study can be applicable outside the UK. Page 16.
2. It is unclear whether or not sample of 5 trials was due to chance or predetermination. Pages 4 (lines 56-59) and 6 (lines 19-25) seem to suggest both predetermination and chance?

We have rephrased and added information to the sample and recruitment section which we hope now addresses this issue. Page 4-5.

3. Were there any disagreements/discrepancies during coding? If so, how were these resolved?

Response: Further information added to address discussion and development of coding framework considering discrepancies. Page 5.

4. Authors mention 'methods of constant comparison' but these are not described in detail. They could either simply say they used thematic analysis or give more detail on how constant comparison was done.

5. Page 4 line 47, delete comma after were ...The identified trials were discussed...?

Response: Comma removed.

6. Page 15 line 35, delete punctuation (apostrophe) after interviewees

Response: Punctuation removed.

Reviewer #4: Overall, this is a well-written and interesting paper to read. The approach of getting first-hand accounts through qualitative interviews in order to understand what elements affect retention in RCTs is relevant and somewhat original. Generally, the methodology is clearly described and the results are thoroughly outlined. However, the article has some shortcomings, which I will encourage the authors to address:

1. Please clarify how many interviews were done over phone versus face-to-face. Further, I encourage the authors in the limitation section to reflect upon the issue of one interview being done over email as well as the challenges of telephone interviews compared to face-to-face interviews.

Response: Details of numbers of phone versus face-to-face interviews conducted have been added. Page 6. Limitations of telephone and email interviews have been addressed within the limitation section of discussion, page 17.
2. Please be consistent in how you place your references. All references should be placed in the end of a sentence (before the full stop) and not in the beginning of a new sentence (after the full stop). This issue also occurs in your quotes.

Response: All references are now placed before the full stop. The current placing of quote identifiers is in line with other qualitative papers published within trials (participant ID comes after full stop). Therefore, these remain the same.

3. Please elaborate on what your sampling framework consisted of (Paragraph "Sample and Recruitment").

Response: Additional detail has been added to the sampling framework within Sampling and Recruitment section, page 4.

4. In your discussion, please consider that different health areas may face different issues with retention due to the nature the disease/health area.

Response: This has now been addressed in the strengths and limitations section of the discussion. Page 17.

5. A key finding of yours, which I will inspire you to clarify in further detail is that even when the study set-up is an RCT, personal factors still play a role and can indirectly affect the study outcomes (validity, power, etc.). Additionally, stress more clearly that you have found that both formal and informal/personal factors that affect retention, and that these elements needs to be considered when designing future RCTs. Consider drafting a flow chart that provides an overview of the different type of factors.

Response: Additional sentences have been added to the discussion to address these points. Page 18. We considered providing a flow chart but, as the different types of factors are not necessarily distinct from each other we felt it would be better to stick with only the narrative.

6. I would suggest that "Informed Consent Forms" are to be available upon request.

Response: A sentence has been added to the availability of supporting data section indicated that blank informed consent forms are available on request. Page 19.

Reviewer #5: The article deals with pertinent issues in randomized controlled trials and how researchers can minimize loss to follow up. Overall, the paper used a qualitative approach which I think was reasonable for this kind of study so as to tease out the "why" and "how" can we deal with the problem of attrition in RCTs.
It is reasonably well written paper, I found no issues and as such I am recommending publication without any revisions. Much of the reported issues are what individuals said with respect to focus groups, it is really difficult to dispute any of their findings.

Further, I find the conclusions and discussions to be very good.