Reviewer's report

Title: Patient and public involvement in data collection for health services research: a descriptive study.

Version: 3 Date: 17 February 2015

Reviewer: Patricia Wilson

Reviewer's report:

I enjoyed reading this manuscript and it is one of the first I have seen describing lay involvement in undertaking non-participant observation within a health care setting. Comparing the coding of both researcher and lay observers’ field notes provided rich data to understand the specific contribution lay involvement provided this study (figure 1 presents this very clearly). It was also of note that the change in protocol to involve lay observers was initiated by lay members of the project advisory group. However, as the rationale presented for the paper was to provide evidence of lay involvement beyond the tokenistic, I was surprised that there were no lay co-authors, or seemingly any lay involvement in undertaking the evaluation beyond just being a passive respondent of an interview? Nevertheless, with revision the paper should make a very useful contribution to the body of knowledge in the field of research involvement.

Major compulsory revisions

1. The role is unclear of the researcher undertaking the evaluative interviews on lay involvement. Was the researcher external to the IMPRESS study or part of the team? If the latter, the authors should consider the impact this may have had on the data collected at interviews and address within the limitations section. Please also see my point above about the lay observers not having a more active role in undertaking this evaluation.

2. Another limitation is that the perspective of research participants (patients) was not sought. I realise this would have added complexity and have resource implications, but it would have been of value to know how patients evaluated the lay observer role, particularly because of concerns expressed by one of the quoted consultants.

3. The major area of development required for the manuscript is around critical discussion. The bulk of the text presents findings, and there is relatively little discussion and conclusion. There are a number of areas that really merit further exploration, and some of the quotes could be edited down to accommodate these. I would suggest the following areas to explore further:

4. There seems to be an assumption (as indicated by the research team's surprise that volunteers would just be recruited through the Trust's volunteer service) that lay involvement is a readily available resource. Resource implications need to be discussed further, for example; the implications for the Volunteer service of having to provide training etc for the lay observers when
they were not actually undertaking the “normal” volunteer role. Additionally, how were the lay observers reimbursed for their time and out of pocket expenses – this must be made clearer.

5. How could the governance issues have been dealt with in a different way? I would suggest a search of INVOLVE resources to see if there are alternative approaches. One that is common is for the lay researcher to be affiliated to a HEI and obtain a research passport through that route.

6. The power issues could also have been explored more. One of the quotes from researcher (3) (page 14) hints at quite a paternalistic relationship; what does this say about the position of the lay observer within the research team?

7. There is plenty of literature on the “professionalization of the lay perspective” debate which would have made a useful contribution to the discussion. Equally, concerns around “diversity” have been previously reported and could be drawn upon.

8. A really important point is made about the need to carefully prepare in advance for lay roles; and this merits a little more amplification.

Minor revisions
Please provide the dates of data collection.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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