Reviewer’s report

Title: Recruiting patients as partners in health research: A qualitative descriptive study

Version: 0 Date: 19 Apr 2017

Reviewer: Louise Locock

Reviewer's report:

This is generally a clearly written and structured paper. There are some aspects of terminology which I would suggest need to be addressed, particularly the use of the word 'engagement' which is generally not used in the UK to mean 'involvement' in research. The authors cite Angela Coulter's paper on patient engagement in support of their opening claims about the benefits of 'engagement', but she was referring to engagement in one's own care and decision-making, not research so much. Similarly INVOLVE was set up not for general public involvement in the NHS but specifically for research involvement. Generally I felt the introduction was a little uncritical about the claims made for the impact of PPI.

I agree that there has been little research into how people are recruited for PPI. However, I feel the paper is a little thin and descriptive as it stands, and misses some opportunities to take a more critical stance. The sample size is relatively small, and focused almost exclusively on professionals. The inclusion of one patient partner, recruited through a patient advocacy organisation, does not really give us enough feel for alternative perspectives. (Incidentally the manuscript is inconsistent in parts of the text as to whether the sample was patient engagement leads and researchers or not (see plan English summary v abstract, for example). As it stands, the analysis focuses on what might be described as 'surface' barriers to recruitment such as public awareness, time, skills, compensation, health status, patient motivations - but does not go deeper into questions of relative power between researchers and patients, or researcher behaviour, control and assumptions. I would recommend something like Peter Beresford's Beyond the Usual Suspects report to stimulate thinking on hierarchy and exclusion, and how (whether consciously or not) the system is designed to marginalise some kinds of people. Related to this, the paper does not consider how - once people have expressed an interest or been identified - they are ultimately selected. Is there a requirement for a CV, a formal application form, and interview? Is there a job description with essential criteria? All of these recruitment processes may serve to make recruitment fairer and more transparent - or to exclude and delegitimise patients whose profile doesn't 'fit' what the researcher wants. The researcher comment on p.9 'I'm not looking to recruit just anybody' is a can of worms waiting to be opened. Several times I thought there were missed opportunities to challenge the surface narrative of what researchers say and critique their stance. The negative case analysis, for example, can be presented as mistaken understanding on the part of the interviewee, or it can be an opportunity to delve into why some researchers make no distinction and what this says about their attitudes and knowledge (or lack of). It felt to me
that too often the burden was on changing what patients do, think and know, and not on researchers and their cultural assumptions.

On content of the findings, health system recruitment seemed to be partly a question of recruitment through prior research participation not just being a patient in someone's care. This could be drawn out more. It was also not completely clear to me how the recruitment strategies would mapp onto the infrastructure. Partnering recruitment sounded rather similar to the third party model. The choice of strategy will also depend on the aim of involvement. If the purpose is to expose researchers to lived experience of a particular condition, for example, community outreach is unlikely to be helpful unless the condition is very common.

The article would need major reworking before it could be accepted.

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

An article of limited interest

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

Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

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