Reviewer’s report

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

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Reviewer: Laura Weeks

Reviewer's report:

Major comments

* The authors describe this study as filling a key gap in the literature, although they do not reference other seemingly related studies and systematic reviews. The article could benefit from reference to the broader literature in this area, and further explanation as to what their study adds to this body of literature. See for example: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4124116/ and https://bmchealthservres.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1472-6963-14-89

* The paper could benefit from a definition of both "recruitment infrastructures" (or ways to find each other? in the plain language summary) and "recruitment strategies", as well a description of the relationship between these themes. Can each strategy be used within each infrastructure, for example?

* Along the same lines, can the authors comment on the differences between "partnering recruitment" as a recruitment strategy (line 235) and the "directory model" as a recruitment infrastructure. To me, these seem quite similar and it again raises the question as to what the difference is, if any, between a recruitment infrastructure and a recruitment strategy.

* In the title and abstract, the study is referred to as a "qualitative interview study", but this terminology does not describe a study design but instead a method of data collection. I think it would be more appropriate to refer to this study as a qualitative descriptive study. See Sandelowski's 2000 paper: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4%3C334::AID-NUR9%3E3.0.CO;2-G/abstract

* On line 125, the authors describe using qualitative description to summarize the data. Qualitative description is a study design and not a data analysis technique. Most commonly in qualitative description studies content analysis is used. I would suggest naming the study design earlier on in the methods section (and the title and abstract in place of "qualitative interview study") and reworking the analysis section to describe the techniques of content analysis.

* Face validity does not appear to be the right term to describe sharing the results of the thematic analysis with the Patient Advisory Council (Lines 97 and 142). Face validity refers
to whether something appears to be measuring what is intended to measure, as in a psychometric analysis. Instead, I wonder if the authors used this strategy of sharing results with the Patient Advisory Council as a form of peer debriefing, or peer review?

* It is my feeling that because the Patient Advisory Council identified a range of issues not covered in the interviews, it seems as if data saturation was not obtained. Can the authors comment on the concept of data saturation, sample size, and the ability to draw conclusions from this study when data saturation does not seem to be obtained?

* Patients' perspectives seem important to obtain, as patient partners ultimately should be consulted for activities that impact them. It would likewise be interesting to compare patient partners' perspectives with researcher perspectives in terms of recruitment strategies. One patient partner interview was conducted, but this seems inadequate to explore this perspective appropriately. Given the research goals differ (i.e. a researcher vs. patient partner perspective) it would seem that either more interviews with patient partners are needed to more comprehensively explore this perspective, or it should be left out altogether since it is inadequately explored. Can the authors comment as to why one interview is sufficient? Further, it would be interesting to understand how the patient partner perspective compared to the researchers' and other participants perspectives.

* In "the exception" section, it seems that this respondent did not understand the intention of this research project, and I therefore question the credibility of these data. It is also interesting to read this person's comments and consider that many of the same limitations that apply to recruiting research participants may also apply to recruiting research partners. Can the authors comment as to how the misconception of this particular respondent, as raised again in lines 343-344, was addressed during the interview? If the interviewee did not understand the intention of the study and line of questioning, it is curious that the interviewer did not correct this individual during the conduct of the actual interview.

Minor comments

* It may help to clarify the purpose of the study throughout as to being about describing strategies that have been used to recruit patients, as opposed to simply "documenting strategies" in the abstract, plain language summary and main text. In the plain language summary, for example, the authors state "The goal of this study was to look at ways of recruiting patients as partners in health research" but it would be more clear and reflective of what was done to report something like "The goal of this study was to describe ways that patients have been recruited by researchers and patient engagement leads".

* The plain language summary could benefit from a definition of 'patient partners'
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