Reviewer’s report

Title: Using Qualitative Health Research Methods to Improve Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement in Research

Version: 0 Date: 06 Aug 2018

Reviewer: Claire Ballinger

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for asking me to review this potentially interesting paper. I have given this review much thought, and whilst it does raise some interesting points, I am unable to recommend publication in its current form. The main reason that I have reached this conclusion is because I am strongly of the view that qualitative research and public involvement and engagement have different purposes, the former being focused on content, whilst the latter is about process. This has been expressed well in a recent Editorial in the British Medical Journal (Wicks, Richards, Denegri and Godlee 2018 'Patients' roles and rights in research' BMJ 362:k3193). Wicks et al (2018) state:

'It is clear, however, that some researchers struggle to differentiate between qualitative research (when patients' experiences are sought and used as data) and including patients as true research partners (when their views and experience contribute to decisions about the research agenda and the design, conduct, and reporting of studies)'. They also cite Liabo et al 2018 in support of this assertion.

I myself am both an applied health qualitative researcher and a public involvement and engagement professional, and whilst I do recognise a synergy between both activities, I carry these out for different purposes, and am driven by different motivations. Public involvement and engagement is in part about democratising research, and ensuring that researchers are accountable, in addition to improving the quality of research. Qualitative research can be about gathering patient experiences ... but equally can be about exploring the constructive potential of text (discourse analysis), describing basic social processes (grounded theory), exploring groups or cultures (ethnography) etc. Whilst many qualitative approaches benefit from patient and public involvement, I would argue that this is not an essential requirement for sound and rigorous qualitative research, as it depends on the methodology/approach employed. Whilst essential within participatory research approaches, for example, it is not critical for discourse or conversation analysis. The skills required for effective public involvement and engagement are also different than those required for sound qualitative research. Key requirements for PPI staff leads according to public contributors (see https://bit.ly/2ulNv9D ) include: sharing power and decision making; being confident; working at a strategic level; being flexible to the needs of public contributors; and being accessible.

I also believe it is misguided to attempt to educate public involvement staff about qualitative research via a paper - it usually takes many years of education and experience to become a proficient qualitative researcher, and the approach within this paper risks further belittling the
expertise of qualitative researchers. In addition, there are a number of problematic issues which require further attention/correction:

- Engagement, co-creation and involvement are at times treated synonymously. Within the UK, great efforts have been made to distinguish between these activities, and to employ precise terminology (see INVOLVE https://bit.ly/1RRw2vu).

- The plain English summary is not a good representation of the scientific abstract.

- Integrated Knowledge Translation is not a term familiar to all readers and needs describing and referencing.

- Some of the public involvement issues supposedly dealt with by using qualitative research strategies have been addressed (eg1 'dense description' - Staniszewska et al 2017 'GRIPP' reporting checklists: tools to improve reporting of patient and public involvement in research' British Medical Journal 358:j3453, eg2 'making engagement accessible' - In the UK, the NIHR provide publically available guidance to support involvement and engagement, and the Research Design Service has financial support available for PPI).

- Other suggestions, such as constant comparative analysis as a means of refining analysis, don't really map well as a strategy for public involvement, where public contributors should ideally help specify the extent and degree of partnership required.

- Whilst reflexivity is a useful strategy in all work and research, it is insufficient in public involvement and engagement without a commitment to work to explicit values such as coproduction, shared power and decision making etc.

I realise that I have a particular view about the relative roles and positions of public involvement and engagement, and qualitative research, which might not be shared by all, and have pondered about how to suggest the authors share their views to promote debate, rather than stifling discussion. My suggestion would be to rewrite and present the paper as an 'Opinion' piece, focusing primarily on the case for using qualitative research to inform PPI/E, with the example strategies being used to support this argument. I hope this suggestion is helpful.

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