Reviewer’s report

Title: “Living a normal life”: a qualitative study of patients’ views of medication withdrawal in rheumatoid arthritis

Version: 0 Date: 26 Jan 2019

Reviewer: Erika Mosor

Reviewer's report:

Comments to the authors

Thank you for inviting me to review the manuscript:

"Living a normal life": a qualitative study of patients' views of medication withdrawal in rheumatoid arthritis which describes the results of a qualitative interview study exploring the views of participants on DMARD withdrawal in RA. The paper provides background information about DMARD tapering and withdrawal, how the study was designed and executed, and findings from the analyses. The research was conducted at a large UK teaching hospital. The researchers made sure that the inclusion criteria of RA were fulfilled, by assessing the patients on the day of interview.

The study addresses an important and emerging area of research (patient perspectives on the withdrawal of disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs in patients with rheumatoid arthritis) for which there is little, qualitative evidence and should be of interest to a wide clinical audience.

As this is a qualitative study, there are no controls required.

However, I have some suggestions that could improve the manuscript further.

1. Abstract: Please describe the study design in the methods of the abstract (page 2, line 32). Also indicate the age and gender of participants in the results of the abstract (page 2, line 37). I would suggest to avoid writing "many" patients in the result part (with an N of 13). "some" patients would be also fine. Instead of "views of DMARD", "views on DMARD” (line 34).
2. **Background:** Very well written. However, I missed two important papers, that could be included:


3. **Methods** Study design: Please describe the study design at the very beginning of the method part (page 5, line 87) and use sub-headers like: Study design, Participants, Ethical considerations, Data collection, Data analysis and maybe Rigor and accuracy of the qualitative study, to better structure the methods section.

4. **Methods** Ethical considerations: I would suggest to add the name of the Ethical Committee and the number of the ethical approval also here and to add that all participants gave oral and written informed consent.

5. **Methods** Data collection: On page 5, line 98, the authors wrote: "Semi-structured patient interviews (see supplementary material available online) were conducted by the same researcher (KB) in a private rheumatology outpatient consulting room". Please mention the development of an interview schedule here.

6. **Methods** Data collection: The duration of the interviews seems to be rather short for an in-depth exploration of the theme. This should be mentioned in the limitations.

7. **Methods** Data collection: It is not clear for the reader what the competences of those conducting the interviews (described on page 6, line 106 and 107) mean.

8. **Methods** Data analysis and results of the study: The qualitative analysis steps should be explained in more detail. Give examples from the original data, how the higher and lower--level themes were built from initial coding.
Regarding the methodological orientation, the analysis of the data seems to follow more a qualitative content analysis than a grounded theory methodology. Especially, when looking at the results depicted in table 2 and 3, the analysis of the data was very much focused on extracting categories from the answers of the questions that had been asked.

9. Methods Rigor and accuracy of the qualitative study: Which strategies were used to improve and verify the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, like debriefing, checking the transcripts against the audio files,…? Please specify. You should also mention that this study adhere to the Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative studies (COREQ) and refer to the supplemental material in the manuscript.

10. Results: I would suggest to also add the median age and gender of participants, as well as the time frame when the study was conducted in the results section.

11. Depicting qualitative results: I would suggest to reduce the original quotes to those of the patients only and to abstain from parentheses, word repetitions and under-lining, where it is not necessary, to ensure that the reader can better read the quote and grasp the meaning. You might reduce the lines between the text and the quote, as the quotes are indented and written in italics. Maybe in bracket after the quote: (No. x, female, age 72, RA for 11 years).

- Is it my son? (page 10, line 201)
- Instead of their health care, it is her healthcare (page 11, line 218).
- In my opinion is better to write e.g. 9 out of 13 participants, as you did on page 14, line 280, than to write "many" (e.g. page 12, line 239).

12. Results Tables:

Table 1: Maybe adapt the table according the APA6th guidelines or similar, and perhaps: Write Demographic/clinical data and Total in the header of the columns

Also add Number of women (%) - this is important!!!

Median age in years (IQR) - this is already in

Also add Age in years min/max (which also might be of interest)
in addition to the clinical data.

13. Tables 2-4 need to be adapted

Maybe rephrase the concepts, to better point out what you mean (e.g. Uncertainty after DMARDS withdrawal, or Getting rid of unnecessary medication,…)

Please discuss whether it would make sense to summarize all of the results of the analysis in overarching themes (higher-level concepts) and responding lower-level themes in one table - focusing more on the research question and the title of your work: patients' views of medication withdrawal in rheumatoid arthritis.

I do not know your data, but the advantages of taking DMARDS could perhaps fit to "DMARDS as a weapon to fight the disease"?

14. Discussion: Perhaps mention the framework (facilitating or hindering "normal life") within the first sentences in the discussion section. It is an important finding!

In the discussion (page 17, line 357) you also pointed out that previous disease experiences and social circumstances were important additional factors that can crucially influence patients' views of DMARD withdrawal. This is very interesting. Please make sure that the reader finds these concepts/themes named in the same way throughout the paper (text and table).

15. Discussion: Please change or explain "unselected" patients? (page 17, line 352)

I wish the authors the best with their continued work in this interesting and promising area.
Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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

Acceptable

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?

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