

Reviewer's report

Title: Acupuncture for dyspnea in advanced cancer: a randomized, placebo-controlled trial (ISRCTN89462491)

Version: 5 **Date:** 1 August 2005

Reviewer: Cinzia Brunelli

Reviewer's report:

This is a good quality paper on the interesting topic of efficacy of complementary therapies. The study is well planned and data properly analyzed. Anyway I think there are some key points both in the methods description and in the results presentation that should be modified or better clarified.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. In stating their objective, the authors define the present study as "... a pilot study that aimed to refine the methodology for an anticipated definitive trial". Yet they declare that "...our results are unexpectedly precise enough to warrant clinical recommendation " which is contrasting with the pilot nature of the study. Although I do personally agree with the authors that the results expressed in terms of 95% CI of the difference between placebo and treatment group, indicate for a unlikely greater effect of acupuncture on dyspnea, I think more caution is needed in making recommendation on the base of a 45 patients pilot study. For this reason I also think that the word "pilot" should be necessarily added to the title. Besides it is my opinion that the main result of the study is the hundredth demonstration of how strong placebo effect can be, thus underling the importance of controlled studies even if, as also this study shows, they are very difficult to conduct in palliative care.

Minor Essential Revisions

2. Pag 11 : Authors defined the "...clinically significant difference between groups, (defined) as a 20% greater reduction in dyspnea score in the acupuncture group compared to placebo", but it is not clear with respect to what value: 20% of the baseline dyspnea level or of the 0-100 scale points or to what else? Please clarify.

3. Authors should give a clear presentation of the power of their study: how much would it be the power to detect a given difference (please express the difference in term of 0-100 scale points) for the full 12-150 pts study and how much is it for the pilot study on 45 pts? I think this can help the readers to have a proper indication of the real value of the study.

4. Table 3 results on the 3rd row (Mean of seven day breathlessness diary): on how many patients was the test performed? Could the authors clarify why the number of patients at baseline is lower than those at follow up?

Discretionary Revisions

Page 12, 2nd paragraph : “For all analyses patients receiving true acupuncture reported slightly higher scores, approximately ...” should be changed into: “For all analyses patients receiving true acupuncture reported slightly higher scores at follow-up, approximately ...”

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests