Reviewer's report

Title: In their own words: qualitative study of high-utilizing primary care patients with medically unexplained symptoms

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Reviewer: Peter Lucassen

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I have read this interesting manuscript with pleasure because the topic is very important for primary care physicians (as well as physicians working as specialists). In consultations with MUS patients, much can be gained by a better understanding of the patient's view. Precisely in this field the authors contribute to the extent of scientific knowledge by way of suggesting some hypotheses that might be fertile in further inquiries.

However, I have some comments as well.

Major compulsory revision

First of all, and most important, I think that the authors do not make sufficiently clear why their study is necessary. What does their study add to what is already known? What gap do the results of their study fill? I think their Background section is too meager. They say that Qualitative studies of patients with MUS have been conducted but these studies have focused primarily on referral patients [9-11]. In my opinion there are several qualitative studies in primary care, both on unspecified MUS and on specific unexplained syndromes (CFS, IBS, fibromyalgia, RSI). Moreover, there are some studies in referred patients, not mentioned by the authors. Finally, there is evidence from quantitative research, for example from questionnaires (one in primary care) and an RCT (in primary care). I will give some references below. The authors state that Given the gaps that exist in the literature, we conducted the qualitative study…. I'm curious to learn which gaps still exist in the light of many prior studies. This has to be stated in the Background section.

I am very critical on this point, but that does not mean that I dismiss this study. I appreciate the manuscript and think that the authors shed new light on some aspects of the attitudes and lived experiences of MUS patients. But they have to formulate better why it is necessary to know these matters and why they did this study given the information already available.

Major compulsory revision

Secondly, I have two remarks on the methodology of selecting the participants and determining the sample size. First, the authors state that The current study population was drawn from a sample of 19 control patients… (page 4). How did they exactly do that. Was it a convenience sample? Or a randomized sample? Or did they purposefully sample the 19 participants? The latter method is the
preferred one in a qualitative design, as it is important to gather information about as many different persons as possible. So, one would prefer to interview male and female participants, older and younger participants, employed and unemployed participants and so on. The breadth of sampled opinions and attitudes allows future researchers to develop, for example, a questionnaire that is applicable to the whole population of high-utilizing MUS patients. Second: was the final sample size determined by ‘saturation’ or did the researchers a priori determine that 19 participants probably would suffice? A sample size depending on saturation seems to me the preferred method in qualitative research. I think that the authors should provide details about these matters.

Major compulsory revision

Thirdly, the Discussion is not clear to me and contains some inconsistencies (page 16 and 17). The authors connect ‘perceptions’ with ‘specific behaviors’. They say: Participants who demonstrated psychological insight also shared stories of achievement, action and altruism. And: In contrast, those who did not offer psychological explanations or insight (but showed ‘worry’ or ‘entitlement’) did not share any stories of achievement, action or altruism. In my opinion they contradict these two sentences on page 17: All worried participants shared stories of achievement, action or altruism. Another example of uncleanness: In contrast, those who did not offer psychological explanations or insight did not share any stories of achievement, action or altruism. Instead they focused on their symptoms and described a sense of entitlement. Instead they… seems to be connected with ‘those who did not offer psychological insights’ which seems to include worry, but worry is clearly not meant here and in the following sentences, given the text: These participants resembled the stereotypical somatizing patients described by Pilowski and others. Consistent with observations of alexithymia in patients with somatization disorder, they did not complain or seem worried about undiagnosed disease. I hope I am clear enough, but I think it is a matter of reformulating what you exactly mean.

Some suggested references


Frostholm L et al. The uncertain consultation and patient satisfaction: the impact of patients’ illness perceptions and a randomized controlled trial on the training of
physicians’ communication skills. Psychosom Med 2005;67:897-905

Dirkzwager AJE et al. Patients with persistent medically unexplained symptoms in general practice. BMC Fam Pract 2007;8:33


**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I have no financial or patent-related competing interests. My only competing interest is that I'm currently working on a publication about the same subject as the authors.