Dear Professor Davenport,

**Qualitative research: a different option on the menu**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to Mr Jaffray’s commentary [1] on our paper “Parents’ experiences of feeding children born with oesophageal atresia/tracheo-oesophageal fistula” [2].

As described by Mr Jaffray, probability sampling and sample size calculations, used in quantitative research can give confidence in the representativeness of the sample and allow for statistical inferences to be drawn. He uses electoral polls as an example of inferences incorrectly drawn from unrepresentative sampling. His criticism of our paper would be fair if it was our aim to make statements about the prevalence of different feeding experiences in oesophageal atresia in the UK. However, there are fundamental differences in the purpose of quantitative and qualitative research. Qualitative research does not aim to determine the percentage of the population that share an experience, rather enlighten us that these experiences exist. This is achieved through examination of the breadth and nature of a particular phenomenon and thus purposive, rather than random, sampling methods are employed. The sample is “purposefully” chosen to gather the most relevant data about the phenomenon under investigation [3]. The underlying principle is the selection of “information-rich cases” [4]. Thus, we contend that sampling through a support group provided articulate, reflective informants who were willing to share their experiences, fitting the definition of a ”good” sample in qualitative research [5]. We do recognise, however, that a group of such participants is likely to be a biased sample for quantitative research.

The generalisability of findings from qualitative research, given the relatively small, selective sample must also be considered from a different perspective to that of quantitative
research. Qualitative research does not allow for statistical generalisability. However, other non-probability forms of generalisability are applicable to this type of research. These include naturalistic generalisation-described as the extent to which the breadth of the results “ring true” with someone with similar experiences (in our case another parent of a children with OA/TOF), inferential generalisation-how intuitively a reader can apply this to their own experience or analytical transferability-the extent to which results resonate with an existing theory or generate a new concept, rather than generalising to a population [6].

Not all parents of children with OA will experience the more extreme reactions articulated in our research, but also those that do have poor feeding experiences may not articulate them to their paediatric surgeon. We believe that the importance of the qualitative research performed is twofold. Firstly, now that we know the breadth of experiences, we can conduct quantitative research to estimate their prevalence in the UK and worldwide. Secondly, as some of the parents who were in our study clearly felt unsupported in their early experiences of feeding their child, we hope that clinicians and allied health professionals (speech and language therapists, dieticians, specialist nurses, psychologists etc.) will specifically ask about experiences and feeding problems so that appropriate support can be put in place where necessary.

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