Reviewer’s report

Title: Response rates to a mailed survey of representative cancer patients: incentive and length effects.

Version: 1 Date: 19 August 2009

Reviewer: Wendy Demark-Wahnefried

Reviewer’s report:

This report offers some interesting information on response rates to mailed surveys as a function of survey length and incentive amount among individuals diagnosed with breast, prostate and colorectal (CRC) cancer. The sample is fairly substantial (n=1200), and a particular strength of this study is its fidelity to the methods of Dillman. That being said, there are several concerns regarding the implementation of this protocol within the cancer registry, the analytic methods, and the report. Major and minor concerns are listed below.

Major concerns

1. Data on cancer stage should be available for cases in the cancer registry, and these data should have been made available, described within the paper (this manuscript appears to be lacking the traditional Table 1, where the sample is described in terms of cancer- type and stage, age, race, and gender (at least for CRC cases), and finally used in the analysis. The authors speculate that poor response rates in CRC patients may be due to higher proportions of individuals with distant disease….indeed, they should base this statement on data from this study, and furthermore, it really is unfortunate that thoughtful sampling was not pursued apriori, i.e., a careful plan to stratify the sample on important variables, such as stage, age, gender and race so that the data that emanated from this study could be stronger. While this is not possible at this point in time, gathering the stage data from the cancer registry and conducting appropriate analyses is indeed possible and should be done.

Likewise, many cancer registries record disease status and are able to categorize whether patients are alive with no evidence of disease (NED), are living with progressive or recurrent cancer, are dead, and also whether they have only been diagnosed with this cancer, or have multiple primaries. No mention was made in the methods to make sure the sample was limited to those who were alive, NED and devoid of other cancers – was it? If the state registry does not uniformly track these data, was any attempt made to run the cases against the state mortality tapes? (this is much more important to do upfront than to present any sort of data on estimated mortality rates and then speculate that the reason for non-response is that the survey was mailed to decedents). Last, but not least, it is concerning that DCIS cases were included in this sample and that a letter actually went out stating that the person was contacted because they had cancer….I am hopeful that the letter included verbiage regarding in situ disease (please confirm since this is an IRB issue)? For the patients who denied that they
had cancer, it is abundantly important to present the stage data.

2. The AAPOR formulae presented for response rate seem much more relevant for telephone surveys than mailed surveys.

3. Independent analyses are used to compare breast cancer cases to prostate cancer cases and then CRC cases to prostate cancer cases instead of conducting these analyses simultaneously.

4. The dollar amounts that have been used in previous studies that were presented in the introduction should be translated to today’s dollar value so that the reader can put this information in perspective to the amounts used in the current survey.

5. One could speculate that there is an effect by gender regarding survey length and incentive amount. Granted, gender is confounded by cancer type with regard to breast and prostate, but there probably isn’t enough power to explore this just within CRC cases.

6. This manuscript requires some serious editing as far as grammar, terminology-use, etc. Perhaps, most glaring is the use of “mail surveys” instead of “mailed surveys.” Even more disturbing is the depersonalized way of referring to the participants on this study. First of all, it is hoped that this survey did in fact yield data that were useful in terms of a greater overarching project (and if so, it would be helpful to mention this). Secondly, the language that is used should indicate that these surveys were completed by individuals.

Minor concerns:

Title: The term “representative,” is used…representative of what?

Few pilot studies involve 1200 participants – the terminology here needs to be reconsidered.

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.