Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 25 August 2009

Reviewer: Elaine McColl

Reviewer's report:

In general, this is a well conducted study, which is clearly reported. The comments below are offered in a spirit of constructive criticism, to improve an already strong paper.

Please number your comments and divide them into

- Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Was a power calculation carried out, or was the choice of 400 patients in each of the samples essentially arbitrary. If a power calculation was carried out, please report it. If not, please justify why not. In factorial designs, the power for the interaction terms is of course less than for the main effects analyses.

2. Please justify the use of prostate cancer patients as the reference group in your dummy coding of type of cancer. Why not colon cancer, since this included both men and women?

- Minor Essential Revisions

1. Page 5. Presumably just as the breast cancer sample comprised only women, the prostate cancer sample comprised only men. This should be made explicit, along with the gender split in the colon cancer sample.

2. Page 5. To avoid confusion with a cross-over trial design, I would recommend substituting 'two by two fully crossed experiment' with two by two factorial experiment'.

3. Page 6. Reference to 'interviews' in the presentation of calculation of response rates is confusing, given that this was a postal survey. Please use a different term ('questionnaires' would be fine).

- Discretionary Revisions

1. Page 3: The cited literature on previous research into the impact of various factors on response rates to postal surveys is predominantly from the US. I recommend inclusion also of citations of reviews carried out in the UK (but of international literature)

Edwards P, Roberts I, Clarke M, DiGuiseppi C, Pratap S, Wentz R, Kwan I.


All of these provide supporting evidence for the issues discussed in this paper.


This paper compared longer (50 questions over 16 pages) and shorter (30 questions over 8 pages) questionnaires in a health survey context and like the paper under review found no effect of length on response rates.

2. Page 13. I agree with your recommendation that a more systematic study would examine the effects of different dollar (or whatever currency is appropriate to the country of research) amounts of incentive. I would also suggest adding that the focus should not be solely on the effectiveness in terms of response rates, but also on cost-effectiveness, and in particular on the marginal cost per extra questionnaire returned (rather than the average cost). Few of the studies identified by Edwards et al and McColl et al in the reviews above considered cost issues.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests