Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 4 September 2009

Reviewer: Phil Edwards

Reviewer's report:

MAJOR COMPULSORY REVISIONS

BACKGROUND
Page 4: The authors provide a good summary of some of the literature on the effects of incentives and questionnaire length on response, but miss two published meta-analyses of these effects:


METHODS
Page 5: The method of randomisation of participants should be described: how was the randomisation sequence generated, who conducted the randomisation, any measures used to conceal the allocation sequence, etc.

RESULTS

It would be more informative if authors could provide an estimate of the main effects of the incentive and length on the percentage responding (with 95% confidence intervals).

Table 3 includes odds ratios and standard errors (for logistic regression coefficients) which are good summary statistics that estimate the intervention effects, but I cannot find any reference to these results in the manuscript.

Throughout the results section it would be useful to report the odds ratio for response with 95% CIs, or to include the p-values. Also, please give p-values rather than “p=NS”.

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS

Page 5: The description of the materials used is very helpful, but more details about the incentive would be useful (i.e. was the $5 incentive made up of five one dollar bills or one five dollar bill?). Also, what time period was specified at which
response rates were calculated? Who packaged and sent the questionnaires?

DISCUSSION

Discussion of the results could include statistical power. For example, what effect sizes was the study powered to detect? Also, rather than reporting that there was a "lack of interactions" it would be more accurate to say "lack of evidence for interactions" as the study was not powered to detect these.

DISCRETIONARY REVISIONS

Pages 6–8: whilst it is useful for researchers to know about the differences between RR2 and RR4, there is rather a lot of text devoted to the explanation which rather detracts from the main messages of the paper. The only difference between the two formulae is the proportion of cases of unknown eligibility that are eligible. Either this material can be appended, or else simply provide a reference to the AAPOR source.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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.