Reviewer's report

Title: A review of equity issues in quantitative studies on health inequalities: the case of asthma in adults

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Reviewer: Francoise Barten

Reviewer's report:

Comments to authors

Review of the paper: 'A review of equity issues in quantitative studies on health inequalities: the case of asthma in adults'. 8 May 2011

Considering the existence of distinct literatures on the underlying determinants of health (in)equities and specific health effects or diseases, this paper provides a coherent and sound contribution to knowledge. The authors use asthma as a lense to establish existing knowledge on some of these questions by examining to what extent quantitative studies identifying inequalities in risk factors and health service utilization for asthma provide the evidence for equity-oriented interventions in order to address not only proximal issues (personal behaviors and lifestyle choices), but "the underlying circumstances restricting opportunities for health".

The research question: 'whether or not, and how quantitative studies identifying inequalities in risk factors and health service utilization for asthma explicitly addressed underlying inequities' is well defined.

Extraction of the data was based on objective evidence (statistically significant findings: a description of inequalities, interventions and/or research directions and a search for equity-related terminology) and subjective evidence (discussion of equity issues without using the exact terms).

Articles were classified as etiological/risk factor studies or health services-oriented as authors expected different approaches to studying and reporting on equity issues. "Etiologica/risk factor studies included not only biological, but also social contributors to disease".

The conceptual difference between risk factors and social determinants of health is worth noting and has implications as well.

Also, the emphasis placed on "health service utilization" versus analysis of the driving forces that impede developing e.g a less fragmented and/or segmented health care system, or an improved balance between rehabilitation, cure, prevention and promotion deserves attention.

The subjectivity inherent in the analysis is acknowledged: all text "in which the authors implied inequity by highlighting potential unfairness or by otherwise
tracing the pathway to inequity” was extracted and these issues are carefully considered in their political, social, and economic context.

The findings are remarkable although not surprising. The concluding comment of the paper that without more in-depth and systematic examination of inequities underlying asthma prevalence, quantitative studies may fail to provide the evidence required to inform equity-oriented interventions to address the underlying circumstances restricting opportunities for health is clear.

The question to what extent this actually demands a transdisciplinary approach that examines driving forces at all - including global- levels and a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods, still deserves an answer.

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest 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 declare that I have no competing interests.