Reviewer's report

Title: Predicting complete loss to follow-up after a health-education program: number of absences and face-to-face contact with a researcher

Version: 2 Date: 26 April 2011

Reviewer: Brian Rice

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Recognising that that loss to follow-up of study participants can bias results, the authors, in this relatively short paper of approximately 1600 words, attempt to identify and describe those participants most likely to be lost to follow-up in a longitudinal cohort study of adults in Japan with chronic illnesses. The authors apply an interesting multi stage approach (baseline and follow-up questionnaires, and group-discussions). Three hypotheses were tested with regards factors associated with loss to follow-up (number of absences from sessions, interest in health and research, and face to face contact with researchers).

Introduction

1. Minor Essential Revisions: The introduction would be strengthened by providing a few more examples of where loss to follow-up has impacted upon studies and what other approaches there have been to promote retention.

2. Major Compulsory Revisions: A clearer purpose would be welcomed (for example, once identified among an existing cohort do you then exclude those likely to be lost to follow-up or are these results intended to guide selection prior to recruitment, thus possibly inserting bias?).

Methods

3. Minor Essential Revisions: How were the open ended questions analysed?

4. Minor Essential Revisions: “People in some of the groups received and returned…….” – a clearer description of how people were selected would be useful.

5. Minor Essential Revisions: With regards the two open ended questions being categorised as “response” or “non-response” how were negative responses categorised?

6. Minor Essential Revisions: “Bivariate analyses” – are you referring to the analysis of two variables or of a single variable with one of two responses?

7. Minor Essential Revisions: “…variables that were most clearly associated with…” – a clearer description is necessary.

8. Major Compulsory Revisions: The authors have chosen to present ROC curves and sensitivity and specificity – for the non-statisticians the authors should provide more information as to why they applied this approach.
Results
9. Discretionary Revisions: Light on results in text
10. Discretionary Revisions: Formatting of tables has come out a little strange.
11. Minor Essential Revisions: Table 2 - for age what is being presented?
12. Major Compulsory Revisions: Table 2 - how data are presented it looks like n/D and not separate figures by category – I would suggest presenting different categories separately under variable name.
13. Minor Essential Revisions: Tables 3 and 4 could be combined.

Discussion
14. Major Compulsory Revisions: With no demographic factors, apart from age, being found to be associated with loss to follow-up the authors being the discussion by presenting their finding that number of absences was a good predictor of loss to follow-up. This highlights one of the limitations of these analyses, generalisability. Apart from age, the factors found to be associated with loss to follow-up are those that can only be known once a study is well under way and therefore it is not clear how these results can help inform future studies reduce loss to follow-up.
15. Minor Essential Revisions: The second paragraph should be restructured / rewritten as the argument is not clear.
16. Major Compulsory Revisions: The authors argue that the predictor of face to face contact is modifiable, but make little mention of the potential cost implications of “modifying” study designs to include this. The authors claim that “it would be less costly to implement in studies of only a few dozens [sic] or hundreds [sic]” but do not support this claim with any evidence.
17. Major Compulsory Revisions: The authors also state that “..costs might be lowered by first using age or other predictors...” – are the authors recommending pre sampling sampling? If so, a discussion on the potential of introducing bias is necessary.
18. Major Compulsory Revisions: It remains unclear how best a researcher can utilise these results at the design stage to limit loss to follow-up.

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.