Reviewer's report

Title: The association between survey timing and patient experiences with hospitals: results from a national postal survey

Version: 1 Date: 29 April 2011

Reviewer: Jonathan VanGeest

Reviewer's report:

General comments:

The article addresses an important topic, as surveys remain an important tool in patient satisfaction research, but also face significant methodological challenges. The questions posed by the author are suitable and the methods utilized in the analyses are both appropriate and sufficiently defined. The review of the literature is up-to-date, but may require some expansion. Finally, the conclusions drawn from the analyses are appropriate, with limitations stated.

Discretionary Revisions:
Abstract: I would recommend using alternative terminology regarding existing research on the effect of survey timing, as “insecure” fails to fully describe the issues involved. The author may choose to simply indicate that the existing research is “contradictory” and then be more specific in terms of where studies differ. Terminology should be changed throughout the manuscript for consistency.

Background: Second sentence – it is recommended that the author expand/be more specific in terms of descriptions of the methodological challenges faced in patient satisfaction research.

Throughout the manuscript the author alternatively discusses “scales for patient experiences” and “patient satisfaction.” I would recommend that the author use the latter terminology throughout, as my understanding is that the scales were designed to measure satisfaction with care.

Minor Essential Revisions:

Background: Revision is needed in terms of the conclusions/logic of the first paragraph. The author states that results of previous studies are contradictory, but then states that timing of surveys might have substantial effects on the estimated level of patient satisfaction. In the face of contradictory evidence, it is recommended that the author present evidence from other fields/subject areas where timing is important to support this contention. This would also expand the literature review beyond the single review paper cited.

Background (second paragraph): It is recommended that the author incorporate support/citations for the possible interpretations regarding survey timing (see
Statistical Analyses: Recommend that the author provide justification for the recode of survey time into the categories chosen.

Statistical Analyses: Incorporate last sentence concerning SPSS use into the last paragraph in this section.

Results: Not sure what “lower patient experience scores” means. Recommend that the author operationalize in terms of “patient satisfaction.”

Discussion: Second sentence is not clear as written. Would recommend that this be restated in terms of time intervals between discharge and survey.

Discussion: Clarify discussion of mode and timing (second paragraph). Additionally, the conclusion drawn from these two studies may be stated in a more cautionary fashion, as it is still difficult to be definitive based on only two empirical works.

Major Compulsory Revisions:
Background: Clarify distinction between survey mode and timing of the survey. As currently written, there may be some confusion.

Limitations: Author should discuss potential skewness based on distribution of the survey time variable. May also be important to discuss in previous sections concerning methodology and analyses.

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

**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.