Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 4 May 2011

Reviewer: Jeanette Ziegenfuss

Reviewer's report:

This is a well-written paper about a well-designed experiment. The paper is well situated in the literature and provides a valuable contribution to those interested in measuring how patients evaluate health care. Specific comments follow.

Minor essential revisions

• Define what you mean by “survey timing” earlier in the abstract and manuscript.
• Methods: Does timing impact any other outcomes such as response rate, time to response or respondent representativeness? These are all important considerations that could be addressed with your data. In the last paragraph of the discussion you suggest that response rate could differ by survey time – you could empirically test this. In this same place you state that non-response bias is not a concern, however, there could be different levels of nonresponse bias by survey timing.
• Methods, data collection: Provide more clarity with respect to the division into 14-day periods. This part of the methods section is unclear. It seems like survey time should be randomly distributed across patient characteristics, but this was not found in your results. Is there something systematically different between those with different survey times?
• Methods, statistical analysis: How were the 4 groups for the survey time variable chosen. If this was done by some manner other than being theory driven, were any sensitivity tests conducted?
• Results: Include response rate here.

Discretionary revisions

• Abstract, background: “insecure” seems like an odd word choice. I would recommend instead inconclusive.
• Abstract, results: include the response rate.
• Methods:
• Discussion: Would be useful to discuss the potential generalizability of these results to other topics, other populations and other modes.

Minor issues not for publication

• Discussion: You state that the response rate is “average” do you mean “in line with”?
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