Reviewer's report

Title: How many mailouts? could attempts to increase the response rate in the Iraq war cohort study be counter-productive?

Version: 1 Date: 18 July 2007

Reviewer: Phil Edwards

Reviewer's report:

General

This paper reports the results of an investigation into the potential for bias that may be associated with the use of repeated mailings of a questionnaire, when attempting to increase response. The study used data collected during a survey of military personnel deployed in the UK-US/Iraq war. Response was 72% after first contact and 88% after one reminder. To investigate possible bias introduced by this increase in response, the authors considered outcome misclassification to be “errors caused by carelessness in completing the questionnaire.” Two measures were then used to quantify this misclassification, based on responses to two questionnaire items and the extent of missing data.

The paper addresses an important issue but I found it a little confusing to read. It would be improved with the use of clearer subheadings and by moving all discussion to a discussion section. The paper could be a valuable contribution to the methodological literature on participation in research, but would benefit from revision (i.e. shortening and restructuring).

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

METHODS

1) The simulation material could be simplified and use a clearer sub-heading – e.g. “Simulation of the effect of misclassification.” If the simulation methods and the formulae presented are described elsewhere (e.g. reference 6), then the methods should be summarised in two or three sentences, and then the formulae moved to an appendix, or possibly removed altogether. (This also applies to Table1.)

2) All statistical methods used (e.g. Chi-squared test) should be described under the heading “statistical analysis”.

RESULTS

3) A Spearman rank correlation is given in the results, but no mention of using this method is given in the methods section.
4) Page 8: the sentence beginning “Since the main aim was to assess…” goes on to describe a method used. This should be in the Methods section.

5) There is discussion in the Results section that should be moved to the discussion (e.g. first sentence “In common with most surveys…”; second paragraph of ‘Investigation of responders’ “..indicating that misclassification of health outcomes may be present…”).

CONCLUSIONS

6) The section headed “Conclusions” is actually a discussion and should be renamed as such.

7) The opening sentence should be a statement of the principal findings, not a reiteration of the study aims.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

8) Abstract: add “disorder” after “stress” in the full PTSD.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

9) The discussion shouldn’t refer to the results of Table 6. This should be described in the results section.

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What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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.