Reviewer's report

Title: Demographic and occupational predictors of early response to a mailed invitation to enroll in a longitudinal health study

Version: Date: 30 November 2006

Reviewer: Lynda Voigt

Reviewer's report:

General
This paper is well written and clearly presents the methods and results. The tables are also clear and the figures present the data in an interesting manner. The data set is rich and provides identical data for both responder and non-responders. Similar studies have not had so much data on non-responders. The statistical methods are appropriate for the data and well described.

The paper would be more interesting and useful if late non-responders were presented as a separate group and would take better advantage of this rich data set. The justification cited for combining late and non-responders was unconvincing to me. The justification is that the goal of the investigation was “not to identify characteristics associated with eventual consent or terminal non-response, a topic that has received much attention.” More work is certainly needed on identifying characteristics of non-respondents and few studies have had identical data on non-responders in such a large set of data. In addition it would be helpful for the readers to be able to compare the characteristics of non-responders in this study to similar studies. The authors should provide the number of late non-responders at the very least.

I disagree with the statement in the second sentence on page 5 that offering incentives and utilizing reminders to improve response are often unsuccessful. Most survey research studies of incentives included in mail surveys have found that incentives do increase response rates. Response does vary by the type of incentive. Other studies have reported that reminders have also increased response rates. The Current Index to Statistics is a good resource for locating these papers. Some can even be found using “Google”.

I found it interesting that this study allowed respondents to complete the questionnaire on a website. Offering multiple ways of responding to surveys is a very timely subject and more information about this would be of great interest to survey researchers. How many people completed the survey on the web? How did their characteristics compare to those who completed the survey by mail? I was also interested in the option of refusing via e-mail and wonder how many people did this. The authors make a good point that allowing people to refuse via e-mail may identify refusers early in the study and reduce cost of reminders and reduce annoyance to responders who will ultimately refuse. I wonder if this option makes it too easy to refuse, and if some of these refusers may have responded with reminders.

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

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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)

Include the number of late non-responders in paper.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

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What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of limited interest
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have not competing interests.