Reviewer's report

Title: Towards socially inclusive research: an evaluation of telephone questionnaire administration in a multilingual population

Version: 1 Date: 20 August 2007

Reviewer: Tim Allison

Reviewer's report:

General

Maximising response rate through telephone administration of questionnaires is an important subject, but there are two key points that need to be dealt with in the study and the conclusion needs revision.

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

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

Consideration must be given to whether the two methods of administration were equivalent and the study appears to show that they were not. Where a choice of method was offered, the telephone questionnaire could be administered immediately whereas the written questionnaire was delayed. Hence the phone survey was one stage and the written one two stage, offering more chance to drop out. It is unclear how many people delayed answering the phone survey, but I expect very few did. Also it is unclear how the people who only completed part of the phone survey were classified. The 98% response rate may mislead readers. If you select people by phone and while on the phone administer a questionnaire it is no wonder that the response rate is nearly 100% and it does not tell us much. There is a literature on phone surveys, albeit not a big one and the authors should for example consider why their results are the opposite of those found by Hocking et al J Clin Epid 2006;59:521-4. I suspect that it relates to how the subjects were contacted in the first place. The comment that there were more languages used in telephone rather than written questionnaires adds to the difference. If someone decided on being contacted by phone that they did not want to participate what happened? Was the default option to send them a written questionnaire anyway?

The other main area that needs further comment is about comparability and this will affect the results of the whole study. How can the authors judge whether the results from the written questionnaires are the same as those on the phone? Can they be pooled and analysed together or are they biased? If someone answered both types of questionnaire would the answers be the same? There is also little mention of standardisation of questionnaires over the phone. Ideally a sample should have had both methods administered (see my paper in Ethnicity and Health 2003;8:63-9).
Given these caveats and the observational nature of the study, the conclusion must be far more guarded.

______________________________________________________________

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

In the abstract, SCT should be spelt out

______________________________________________________________

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

It would be interesting to know whether mobile or landline phones were used by the subjects since use of mobiles may be very high and good to target.

The first section of the abstract is an aim rather than background

Missing data MAY bias results.

Costs could be reduced in phone interviews if the interviewers spoke the appropriate language and so there would be less need for interpreters.

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

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