Reviewer's report

Title: Determinants of participation in a longitudinal two-stage study of the health consequences of the Chornobyl nuclear power plant accident

Version: 1 Date: 3 January 2008

Reviewer: Lars Weisaeth

Reviewer's report:

Major Compulsory Revisions

I would like the authors to reconsider the available evidence related to the first of the three main concluding points they make. It is to the explanation of why higher levels of psychological distress were associated with participation in their follow-up study in contrast to findings in Western studies. Although I agree that the interpretation provided by the authors, the distinction between a Western and a non-Western population, may be correct, their discussion of an alternative explanation should be broadened. Could it rather be that it is the type of disaster that makes the difference? Could it be that help seeking behaviour differs after disasters with sudden and violent invasive impacts, that are likely to produce post-traumatic stress responses such as explosions, transport disasters etc. At least two of the Western disaster studies the authors refer to in terms of the non-response issue, are of this nature. Toxic disasters on the other hand do not typically produce disorders within the post-traumatic stress spectrum.

(Leaving my normal modesty aside for a moment, I give in to the temptation to refer to a study I myself did on the non-response to a combined systematic outreach research project following an industrial explosion: The 19% who did not at once respond positively to the invitation to be examined, but were later recruited into the study, turned out 7 months post-disaster to contain 40% of the total number of cases of PTSD. The main explanation for the non-response was the avoidant behaviour which is a regular part of the post-traumatic stress syndrome. Weisæth L (1989) Importance of high response rates in traumatic stress research. Acta Psychiatr. Scand. Suppl.. 355; 80:131-137).

It is perhaps to be expected that there will be a high participation rate to medical follow-up examinations that focus on so-called chernobyl related illness. If the focus was on somatic symptoms as well, and not only on the psychological aspects, the avoidance of stigma that is usually associated with post disaster psychiatric follow-up studies, could have been avoided, which would be helpful in achieving lower non-response rates.

Minor Essential Revisions

Is the spelling Chornobyl throughout the paper a Ukranian convention for the international spelling? The same applies to Kiev and Kyiv? Particularly the latter spelling may confuse the reader.
Discretionary Revisions

The authors express surprise that the young adults in the focus groups expressed boredom with the topic of Chernobyl while they were likely to accept a clinical evaluation and follow-up. In my experience I rather find that typically young adults, at least the males, in a group context have a need to express such negative attitudes. Their individual help seeking behaviour, however, may illustrate a more independent motivation.

The gender aspects of help seeking behaviour could also be discussed a bit more in the paper.

I would recommend that the paper is accepted after minor essential revisions.

**What next?:** Accept after minor essential 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.