Reviewer's report

Title: Are smokers more likely to be encouraged to consult a doctor about their symptoms? A survey in Western Australia.

Version: 1 Date: 22 September 2008

Reviewer: Jennifer Cleland

Reviewer's report:

The methodology is very atheoretical, the sample size is small and thus the paper has limited value and generalizability.

- Major Compulsory Revisions

I found the title of this article most confusing, possibly due to the use of the passive rather than the active. A more accurate title might be "What respiratory symptoms and patient variables encourage advice to seek medical help? A survey ...." My suggestion is just that but I do recommend a more accurate title.

The recruitment of 140 responses over 2 weeks from 2 general practices is a very small sample size, probably an artifact of the methodology. However, some comment on the methodology in the discussion would be useful - how many patients passed through those practices over the time period in question? What proportion of patients completed a questionnaire? Would the authors recommend this approach in future? Etc.

More detail on the vignette development is essential. Who was involved in their development? Just how many people were they piloted with, and who were these people? How were they revised after piloting? How were the advice options presented? What was the completion rate (ie how many respondents gave responses for all 9 vignettes)? How many people gave a response for each of the 64 scenarios/were all 64 incorporated into the analysis?

The methodology is very atheoretical. A much more robust way to predict how people will behave (the behaviour = giving advice) is to use a theory of behaviour prediction or change as a basis for questionnaire development e.g., theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behaviour (TPB). TPB has been used widely in healthcare research and may well have been used in respiratory. The best known authors of this type of work are Marie Johnston, Jillian Francis, Martin Eccles - search for Johnston as an author in the BMJ website for some useful articles. Vignettes can be based on the TPB - TPB questionnaire studies are widely published.

Analysis - looks OK but a statistical review is required. 21% of the variability could be explained from 4 of the variables - how much variability could be predicted from any one of these variables? More should be made of this in the discussion - is 21% good, bad or indifferent - is this of any use?
It would be useful to start the discussion with what was found and what this suggests, rather than respondent details (which should be in the discussion, but later).

The methodological limitations of this study - method of recruiting participants and atheoretical basis - must be discussed. This really seems like a pilot as a result.

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.