Reviewer's report

Title: Trends in influenza vaccination uptake among people aged over 74 years, 1997-2000: Survey of 73 General Practices

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Reviewer: Paul George Wallace

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Relevance
This paper reports a study on influenza vaccination carried out from data collected some time ago as part of the MRC Trial of Elderly Assessment. The aim of the study, which was carried out as an ‘add-on’ was to determine the relationship between vaccination policy change and rates of influenza immunization uptake. This is a potentially important subject and one on which there is a relative dearth of good research information.

Objectives
The objectives are stated in general terms, but it is not clear what aspects of policy change the authors intended to evaluate. Was it the change in recommended lower age limit or the financial incentive introduced more-or-less at the same time?

Background
The background section is brief and confined to a description of influenza vaccine policy. There is no reference to previous studies relating to activity in general practice to policy changes and/or financial incentives. Nor is there any mention of how such studies can be designed. This seems to be an important omission, which the authors should address.

Methods
There is too little information on how vaccination records were utilized to provide the data on influenza vaccination. Was this from routine practice recording, or was it asked at interview? If the former, was it on paper or electronic? Was any attempt made to evaluate the reliability of the recording method, and how this may have changed over the different years of the study.

References are made to the use Poisson regression modeling, but we are not told what this was designed to achieve. We are not told how or why these models were developed, and this is confusing as they are referred to subsequently in the results sections and in the results table.

Results
We are told that there were 24,750 people who had vaccination records for at least one year. We were told that this represents 55% of records for all the years. The authors should supply the figures relating to the proportion of the population who had vaccination records both by age band and by year of study. The overall figure of 55% with vaccination records is low, and this draws into question the reliability of the figures for vaccination uptake. This will be particularly important if coverage is low for particular age groups in particular years.

As mentioned previously, we need to have much better information about how models 1-4 were derived and exactly what they represented. Without this information, it is not possible to interpret properly the data presented in Table 1.
Discussion and Conclusion
The authors do not discuss the limitations of the study nor their implications for the interpretation of the findings. Given the low percentage of vaccination records available, this would seem to be an important issue and deserves a good deal more coverage. There is no discussion of the potential contribution of the change in targets for coverage compared with the introduction of a financial incentive of item-of-service payment. Again, this appears to be an important issue for the authors to discuss. Furthermore, there is no discussion of other factors which may have contributed to the change in vaccination uptake, such as public awareness campaigns.

The final conclusion that “the upturn in 2000 should encourage efforts to increase vaccine uptake further” is a rather vague statement. Without proper critical discussion of what the apparent improvement was due to, this conclusion is of limited assistance.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Declaration of competing interests:
None