Reviewer's report

Title: General practitioner practices in requesting laboratory tests for patients with gastroenteritis in the Netherlands, 2001-2002

Version: 1 Date: 17 March 2006

Reviewer: Markku Kuusi

Reviewer's report:

General
The article describes the practices on examination of stool samples from patients with gastroenteritis who consult their GP. In the manuscript, descriptive and basic analytical epidemiological methods are used. As a result, the reader can get a rather clear picture about this practice in the Netherlands. The article is well structured, understandable and focuses on the topic that is well described in the title.

The research question of the study is well defined and worthwhile to analyse. It is new in that sense that nobody has studied it in the Netherlands before. The methods are clear and well described. Although there are minor deficiencies in the presentation of the data sources and the results, as a whole they are well presented. Discussion and conclusion are in good balance and are supported by data. The title and the abstract perfectly fit the content. The writing is acceptable.

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

None.

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

1. In the results section, sometimes the number of patients is mentioned, sometimes only the proportion of them. It would be better to give the numbers systemically for all variables, not only the proportions, e.g: page 5, 3rd paragraph 8. line: “(90% versus 63% for patients…))”, and there are more on pages 6, 7 and 8.

2. Page 5, line 5. The authors write that “Most laboratory tests…” while meaning that lab tests were most often requested in the summer months. I would understand “most laboratory tests” as more that 50% of the tests.

3. Page 9, line 5. According to Table 3, there were 17 patients with a parasite, here in the brackets the number is 18.

4. Table 1. 3rd column title is incomplete: that proportions are given in brackets is missing.

5. Figure 1. In the title of the graph, the authors write “percentage of laboratory tests”. However, in the figure itself, the y-axis is labelled “number of laboratory tests”. Please, clarify.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1. Page 3, paragraph 1. Much of the information in the 3rd and the last sentence is essentially the
same.

2. The reader might be interested in where the stool specimens are investigated, and where they are located in comparison to the GP practices. Does e.g. transporting of the samples require lot of time, which might affect the efficiency of lab tests - and this study.

3. Page 4, line 3. “The network consists of approximately 46 practices…” The expression is a bit vague, is it possible to tell the exact number of practices, and if not, why?

4. In several places in results, pages 5 to 8, where statistical tests have been done, “relatively” should be replaced by “significantly”. In some other places “relatively” is probably not needed; e.g. page 7, line 5: “more often” instead of “relatively more often”.

5. Page 7, Test results. It would be helpful for the reader, if the number and proportion of positive test results would be given in the first sentence.

6. Page 8, line 7. Is p=0.06 significant?

7. Page 13 line 16. The authors suggest that the 5 work related specimens were rather little, but leave the reader alone to estimate how many there should be?

8. 26% of the questionnaires were not returned. Were these persons who were not included in the analysis similar to those included in the study, or could there have been a selection bias?

9. The whole article is rather long, the authors might think about shortening especially the results section, which sometimes gives very detailed results.

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

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.