Reviewer’s report

Title: Pathways to the diagnosis of lung cancer in the UK: a cohort study.

Version: 1 Date: 30 January 2008

Reviewer: Michael B Barton

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The paper deals with an interesting and underexplored subject; the pathways of referral for cancer patients to management services. It demonstrates increased time between referral and diagnosis of patients who were not referred to a respiratory clinic. Further process and outcome measures would make a much stronger case that the delay was harmful. The authors could correlate delay with increasing stage at presentation, treatment or no treatment, palliative versus radical treatment or poorer survival. Survival would be a simple endpoint but the numbers in the study may be insufficient to demonstrate a significant difference.

The following comments refer to minor issues;

1. Percentages in the abstract are confusing. The authors should clarify the populations from which different percentages are drawn.

2. It is unclear why asymptomatic patients presented to emergency.

3. Trends in referral patterns over time may reveal changes in practice. If numbers are insufficient for analysis of year as a continuous variable then the analysis could examine time periods before and after guidelines introduction.

4. Geographic factors often affect access and patterns of referral. Patients who live further from medical specialty centres may take longer to be referred or may be referred to inappropriate clinics.