Reviewer's report

Title: Factors associated with the goal of treatment in the last week of life in older patients: a population-based death certificate survey

Version: 2 Date: 10 December 2013

Reviewer: Claire Goodman

Reviewer's report:

The study aims to provide an evaluation of the main goal of treatment in the last week of life of people aged 85 and older compared with those between 75 and 85 and to examine how treatment goals are associated with age. There is a good rationale for the study. The findings are clearly presented and reiterate what is already well documented in the literature about this age group. The comparison between the younger and older age groups is useful and adds to what is known.

Overall this paper contributes to the literature on dying in old age and provides a useful baseline for future work and discussion about how interventions to improve end of life care for this group could be framed.

Minor revisions
1. How was representativeness defined for the sampling of the death certificates?
2. The response rate is impressive. Was any information collected about the survey respondents, e.g. training in end of life care, position held? What was the process of administering the questionnaire, how many questions were asked, were physicians sent reminders and/or given incentives to complete the questionnaires and how long did it take to secure the response rate achieved?
3. The study was undertaken in 2007 and the certificates reviewed were from June 1 and November 30. What was the time lapse between the death registration and the physician being asked to comment on the goal of care?
4. Data collection was completed almost 7 years ago; this should be acknowledged as part of the limitations. Have there been any changes in policy and practice in end of life care in the interim?

Discretionary revisions
1. Some of the suggested explanations for the observed differences between the age groups, whilst reasonable, are wide ranging and go beyond what can be known from the data as presented. Not knowing anything about the events leading up to death apart from an espoused/remembered treatment goal is a constraint. Some of the observations about possible reasons for the findings could be reframed as future research questions.
2. In a study that considers dying and the oldest old it would have been interesting to see some discussion about what the data showed about the presence of co-morbidities (and their documentation on death certificates).
3. As part of the discussion of the findings, do the authors think current debates about the assessment of frailty as opposed to a focus on chronological age have relevance for decisions to treat or provide comfort care?

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**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.