Reviewer's report

Title: Do social networks affect the use of residential aged care among older Australians?

Version: 1 Date: 27 June 2007

Reviewer: Jouke van der Zee

Reviewer's report:

General a good paper about a relevant subject; I miss however a brief outline of the basic elements and conditions of the Australian long term care system (legal conditions: are children obliged to take care of their indigent parents financially; insurance aspects and financial conditions like eligibility, accessibility (waiting lists), out of pocket costs, means tests, both for low level residential care and for nursing homes. Doesn't Australia have home care (community nurses, home helps) and if so, does home care use influence residential care use? And do hospitals have long term wards or beds that can act as an alternative for residential care for the elderly? In short, please describe the context of Australian residential care (including its alternatives) far more clearly than in the current paper (at the last page something is said about a substantial policy change during the research period. I am afraid you can't just mention that without splitting the data in a before and after the change period.

The second general remark regards the way the authors deal with the subjects that died during the study period; that is to say: those who died without having used residential care. As far as I understood this group was lumped together with the group that was still alive and did not use residential care, either. Wouldn't it be more prudent to separate these two groups? It depends on the general conditions for care for the elderly, which are not described, but theoretically people could have died because access to residential care was denied for some reason (non-eligibility; costs too high; too few beds in hostels and nursing homes, waiting lists too long), so they might have had the same determinants as the users of residential care.

I think the authors should show that those who died without using residential care, can be compared, indeed, with those who did not use care and were alive at the end of the study period. And, anyway discuss it in the last section.

Minor points: language:1) the authors use phrases like: networks are protective against any nursing home use

I'd strongly advise to use more neutral phrases like: negatively related to ....; the study does not prove that networks are protective; the causality and the mechanisms are not fully clear, although (a part of) the study is longitudinal.

2) the results are described in typical 'variables language' (page 12 first line: "repeating the analyses excluding those already in residential care at wave 1 showed the significance of home ownership was due to those already in care at
baseline, but age group and hearing difficulty remained significant risk factors.” Beside the fact that I honestly do not understand the relevance of this result (it seems to me a typical random hit), the variables jargon makes the line unaccessible. So please use English that can be understood by those professionally interested in the subject.

The discussion section is rather a summary of the results than a discussion: in the discussion the findings should be summarized, indeed, but than they should be compared to results from other (australian) studies and studies from other countries. In this comparison contextual elements and explanations (different conditions, different funding, differences in access) should be distinguished from common and general elements. Finally the relevance for future research, for practice and policy should be indicated (well, should, that what I think)

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

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

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

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What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

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

Declaration of competing interests:

no competing interests