Reviewer's report

Title: Falls in advanced old age: recalled falls and prospective follow-up of over-90-year-olds in the Cambridge City over-75s Cohort study

Version: 1 Date: 27 September 2007

Reviewer: Keith Hill

Reviewer's report:

General
This is a well written paper that addresses issues around falls risk for a rapidly growing and largely unexplored group within the at risk population - being those in the 90+ year age group. As such, it provides useful additional data to what is currently known.

The sample are those remaining in a long term sample, drawn initially through representative general practices in the initial wave of recruitment in 1985. The sample and subsequent analyses have pooled all participants together, irrespective of current living arrangements. It would be useful, at least for the overall descriptive data of proportion of fallers and multiple fallers, for this data to be presented separately for those still living at home, compared to those in sheltered care or institutional care. It is likely that the main regression analyses would most likely be underpowered to be sub-analysed in this way, so this section of analyses is appropriate as it stands.

A strength of the paper is the very high recruitment rate of cohort survivors. However there is very little description of the participants, other than their some basic demographics (age, living arrangements, education etc). It would be useful to have a little more health status profile for the participants, assuming this information might be collected within each wave of this longitudinal main study - for example, number / type of chronic health problems, medication use, ?? measure of function or mobility, and proportion with cognitive impairment.

The analyses provide some useful information about the influence of some of the key socio-demographic characteristics and their association with falls risk. A next step is to have a closer look at the specific intrinsic and extrinsic factors contributing to falls in this cohort, and the consequences of falls in this cohort, to provide a more detailed picture of interventions that might be considered most useful in this increasingly prevalent group. This point should be noted in the discussion as to future directions for research in this area.

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

1. page 8, paragraph 2 - it would be useful to know what proportion of the initial
sample (1985) who could have still been in the sample for this study remained in the study, and the proportion who have been lost over time due to death, and the proportion who have dropped out in subsequent waves. The dropout rate, and reasons for dropping out, in particular are important to gain an appreciation of exactly how "representative" the cohort who remain in the study are.

2. page 9 - insert greater level of detail of profile of participants (eg number of chronic health problems, medication use, function etc) if this information is available.

3. page 14, paragraph 1, line 13 - ?? should Figure 1 be Table 1 here - the information referred to in the associated text regarding differences in odds ratios is not in Figure 1.

4. page 15, paragraph 1, lines 7-10. The discussion about different people falling in the pre and post interview periods would benefit from a little more explanation of possible factors contributing to this, such as new health problems increasing the risk of someone who was previously at lower risk, or that a higher risk person may have had a successful intervention introduced that stopped them from falling.

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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)

1. throughout the paper, references in square brackets need to have a space between the preceding word and the square bracket.

2. page 7, paragraph 1, line 7 - was a definition of "near fall" used. If so, it should be included here.

3. page 8, paragraph 2, line 6 - use provide the mean age to the same decimal places as the sd of age (ie to one decimal place).

4. page 9, paragraph 1, line 1 - clumsy wording of text - suggest change "reportedly fell" to "reported falling"

5. page 13, paragraph 2, line 5 - delete the word "significant" - should only be used when talking in a statistical sense.

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1. Consider restructuring the discussion a little. The section "Comparison with previous reports" would seem to fit better earlier in the discussion, and the section "strengths and limitations" is often near the end of the discussion.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.