Reviewer’s report

Title: An evaluation of classification systems for stillbirth

Version: 2 Date: 26 September 2008

Reviewer: Russell Kirby

Reviewer’s report:

In this manuscript, the authors evaluate six stillbirth classifications using stillbirth cohorts from seven countries. The comparison focuses on the ability of each classification to retain important information concerning each death, ease of use, inter-observer agreement, and the proportion of 'unexplained' stillbirths from each classification. The paper makes an important contribution to the literature, but requires some modification to improve readability and scientific impact.

Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

The entire text should be carefully copyedited, to improve readability, converting sentences to active voice where possible. Acronyms should be spelled out at first use in the text (even if defined in the abstract). Throughout, use ‘et al.’

In the references, be consistent on journal names. Journals with acronym abbreviations (BMJ, JAMA, BJOG, etc) should be fully capitalized. Items referencing web URLs should indicate date of most recent access.

Here are a number of language improvements:

P 2: second section of methods, change ‘across’ to ‘from’
P 4: fourth line, what is ‘mean’ stillbirth – use a more precise term here
P 4: third line from bottom, spell out ICD
P 6: change second sentence under Methods to ‘We restricted the search to the English language, and . . .’
P 7: beginning of first full para, define the characteristics of a ‘potentially eligible system’ before indicating how many were excluded
P 7: in the section headed ‘Characteristics of included systems’, begin by listing the key characteristics. Then discuss how these were applied to the six classifications under study in this paper.
P 8: under heading ‘Main outcome measures’ begin with an introductory paragraph before discussing each in turn
P 9: under inter-observer reliability, how was this measured?
P 10: line four, change ‘people’ to ‘persons’
P 11: line five, delete ‘which were’. Sentence beginning ‘Five systems were used’ add a hyphen between ‘paper’ and ‘based’
P 13: last line, the ‘d’ in ReCoDe is not capitalized

P 15: midpage, change ‘as follows’ to ‘for’. Next sentence, change ‘cases of stillbirths’ to ‘stillbirth cases’. Change ‘that’ to ‘those’ in next line.

P 16: the sentence including ‘scored the classifications they were associated with’ is clumsy- please reword

P 17: first line of discussion, change ‘of any’ to ‘for’, change ‘stillbirths’ to ‘stillbirth’. Later in this sentence, add comma after ‘apply’, next sentence add comma after ‘evaluation’ and after ‘settings’. Next sentence, add comma after ‘However. Further down, change sentence to ‘This result is consistent with the findings of others [5,6] that . . .’ Further still, which are referred to as ‘these systems’? Next sentence, add comma after ‘retention’. Second line from bottom, change ‘includes the’ to ‘include its’

P 18: line 7, delete ‘was’, change ‘from’ to ‘by’. Delete ‘This study, which’. Add period after ‘histopathology’. Delete ‘rates of 72% and 99% respectively’. Next sentence begin with ‘This study found . . .’ and end with ‘. . . stillbirths compared with other stillbirth classifications’. Further down, change to ‘. . . study, Tulip resulted . . .’. Next sentence, change ‘such as’ to ‘(e.g. . . .’ and add ‘)’ at end of sentence.

P 19: next to last sentence before new para, change ‘classification’ to ‘classifications’

P 20: add hyphen between ‘user’ and ‘friendly’ Second to last sentence, change to ‘. . . may also have been higher due to a multidisciplinary . . .’ Last sentence, change beginning into new sentence ending ‘. . . systems in the literature varies’. Then begin new sentence as written.

P 21: remove ‘,’ after ‘While’. Next para first sentence, change ‘included’ to ‘incorporated’

P 22: change ‘as such’ to ‘per se’. Last line, insert proper reference to Froen et al 2008.

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

Discuss on p 11 whether the random sample of 100 cases included some from each of the seven countries? Was there any stratification applied in drawing this sample?

Throughout, the phrase ‘statistically significantly different’ is used. This is not necessary given that the p-value (ie p<0.01) is also provided. Delete the word ‘statistically’ where it appears in this phrase in the results.

On p 15, under section ‘Developing country settings’, are any of the comparisons statistically significant (by Chi square or t-test for difference of proportions)?

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

Table 2 referred to on p 14 should not be a supplemental table. It should be
incorporated into the text.

The information about stillbirth characteristics at bottom of p 14 should probably appear earlier in the results section. It would make more sense to describe the characteristics of the study sample before getting into details of results.

Figures 1 and 2 would contain more information in less space if combined into a single table, and including the mean and standard deviation for each value.

Figures 3 and 4 would also benefit from showing the standard deviation. Better choices in shading of the bars would be beneficial.

Several of the additional files should be incorporated into the body of the paper. Tables 1-4 should definitely be included. Additional files 5-9 should be combined into a single supplemental file for ease of use by readers, and this file should also include a dynamic link to the CODAC application as well.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**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.