Author's response to reviews

Title: Self-reported history of Pap-smear in HIV-positive women in Northern Italy: a cross-sectional study

Authors:

Luigino Dal Maso (dalmaso@cro.it)
Sivia Franceschi (franceschi@iarc.fr)
Mauro Lise (lisemauro@cro.it)
Priscilla Sassoli de Bianchi (PSassoli@rgione.emilia-romagna.it)
Jerry Polesel (polesel@cro.it)
Florio Ghinelli (florio.ghinelli@libero.it)
Fabio Falcini (f.falcini@ausl.fo.it)
Alba C Finarelli (AFinarelli@regione.emilia-romagna.it)

Version: 4 Date: 18 May 2010

Author's response to reviews: see over
To: Editor BMC Cancer

Re: MS: 2587129830905838 "Self-reported history of Pap-smear in HIV-positive women in northern Italy: a cross-sectional study"

Dear Editor,

Thank you for your letter of May 10 and for the helpful reviewer’s comments. We have now revised our article according to their suggestions, and we hope it can be reconsidered for publication in BMC Cancer. All amendments have been highlighted in the revised version of the manuscript to track changes.

Here below is our point-by-point reply to reviewers’ remarks.

Reviewer 1 report:
This is a cross sectional study in which a self administered questionnaire was used to determine the use of Pap smears by HIV positive women in the Emilia Romagna region in Northern Italy. There was a good response from the women who were invited to participate from the infectious disease clinics. It is not clear where the other HIV positive women in the region (who were not invited) receive their follow up and if they were in any way different.

RE: We specified in the Discussion section that “...all women attending HIV follow-up (recommended every 6 months) were contacted in a 1-year period.” We added a sentence to clarify this issue: “It is unlikely that HIV-positive women in the region received their follow-up visits elsewhere, given the high standard of medical care provided (free of charge) in Emilia-Romagna in comparison with other Italian areas. However, the possibility of some socio-demographic bias in women who did not attend regularly follow-up cannot be totally ruled out.”

The percentages of colposcopy and conization (p 7) need to be verified.
RE: We corrected the error and clarified the sentence: “Among the 178 women to whom treatment was recommended, 145 (81%) reported colposcopy and all follow-up tests. Conization ...”
Discussion should include whether the Pap smears are being offered to all HIV positive women. Is the 61% Pap smears reported in the previous year due to a compliance problem, advice failure or an access issue?

RE: We modified a sentence in the Discussion section to clarify that In Italy, Pap smears are recommended annually to all HIV+ women. In addition, the sentence at the end of page 8 (Overall, our study highlights...) tries to summarize the reasons of compliance to recommendations.

**Reviewer 2 report:**

Overall, this version of the manuscript is substantially improved over the previous version. However, the absence of validation of the Pap remains a strong weakness. The title is still misleading. Some thing like “Self-reported history of Pap-smear in ...” would be closer to the study. Actually, this the wording used by the authors in the first sentence of the conclusion of the abstract.

RE: We modified the title and the first sentence of the Conclusion as suggested.

The authors explain in the covering letter that they are planning a new study. This should be added in the Discussion.

RE: We added the sentence in the Discussion section: “To validate self-reported Pap-smear use and to follow-up the treatment of HIV-positive women diagnosed with gynaecological lesions, a new study is being planned, which will adopt broader confidentiality rules and obtain a written consent to follow-up.”

Level of interest: An article of limited interest.

RE: We added a sentence to stress that “The opportunity to prevent cervical cancer in women living with HIV infection should not be missed; a successful implementation of such screening programs will also teach valuable lessons that could then be applied to all women [5].”

We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards

Luigino Dal Maso, Sc.D.
Epidemiology and Biostatistics Unit
Aviano Cancer Center
via Franco Gallini 2 - 33081 Aviano PN (Italy)
tel. +39 0434 659354 fax +39 0434 659231